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MARION POST

NEW DEAL PHOTOGRAPHER
AND
RACIAL EGALITARIAN, 1938-41

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MPhil Modern History
Birkbeck, University of London

2017



Marion Post. *Negro Man Entering Movie Theater by Outside Entrance to Upstairs 'Colored' Section, Belzoni, Mississippi.* 1939.

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My late father always encouraged me to pursue my academic interests and to travel. He would be delighted about all of this – and not a little envious of all those trips to the States! Thank you for everything, Dad.

I wish I could find words to thank my mother, who saved my life in 2013. Her love has enabled me to recover from serious illness, return to normal life and complete this project.

Mum, this is for you and Dad, with all my love.

**FOR MY MOTHER
AND
IN LOVING MEMORY OF MY FATHER**

ABSTRACT

Marion Post worked for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), between 1938-1941. I argue that her work was misunderstood by early scholars, while later critics failed to fully explain her beliefs and motivation. My study examines selected series and individual images, contextualised by biographical evidence from the primary sources. The work of critical race theorists and scholars influenced by Marxism and feminism is used to re-examine Post's work. I argue that Post was a radical activist concerned with removing racial and social inequality.

Analysis of Post's work demonstrates that she sought neither to bear witness to inequality nor to support its amelioration within existing social structures. She wished, rather, to expose and abolish it. My close analysis, in chapter two, of an image that I argue is an iconic photograph suggests that Post's work presaged that of the civil rights photographer Danny Lyon. Chapter three examines series of images exploring unionisation and strike action, while chapter four concerns series exposing poor black housing in Washington, DC and the contrast between the lives of poor and wealthy whites and between poor whites and poor blacks in Florida. Throughout, Post's highly individual use of aesthetics to strengthen her argument is evident. I argue that this represents her radical response to the social injustice she observed and sought to redress. I argue that my analysis of selected series of images is applicable to Post's wider body of work.

INTRODUCTION

'RADIANT AND INTELLIGENT; PLUCKY AND OPINIONATED; FULL OF GRACE AND DIGNITY, LIKE HER PHOTOGRAPHS'¹: THE WOMAN AND HER WORK

When Marion Post took up her first post as a professional photographer in 1937, her male colleagues on the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin welcomed her by throwing spitballs into her darkroom. Post

exploded, telling them I was there to stay, I had to earn a living too, this was where I was going to do it and they better damn well like it. I told them how and when I could be useful to them, and I could be, and that I needed their help in return ... We reached a truce. (AG114, box 3, file 8).

'AN INSPIRED AMERICAN IDEALIST': THE WOMAN

Post was well-prepared for the challenges facing a professional woman in the 1930s. Born in Montclair, New Jersey in 1910, younger sister to Helen, she described her father, family doctor Walter Post, as 'very conservative' (AG 114, box 6, file 5). Her mother, Nan, was different. Post's parents divorced acrimoniously when she was 13. While this experience made Post deeply sceptical about marriage, her mother's response to her new circumstances provided an inspiring example for her young daughter.

I will argue that Post's activism evolved from radical influences during her childhood and early adulthood. Post's mother, perceived as 'too eccentric and too radical' by neighbours in Montclair, had a very positive influence on her young daughter (McEuen: 2004 128). She would not tolerate racism and insisted that Charles and Reasie Hurd, the family's African American handyman and housekeeper, were treated as equals. The intersections of race and social class and gender are clearly represented here. Post's mother's views were progressive and unusual within their small-town environment. Post said later of Reasie that she 'loved me as her own child' (Hurley: 1989 5). Reasie's mother had been a slave. Reasie often talked to Post of her mother's life 'and the life of black people in the South' (Hurley: 1989 5). Jack

¹ Photographer Jack Welpott's description of Post (AG114, box 6, file 1).

Hurley says of Post that she 'loved and, more important, respected the Hurds' and that she later recognised her relationship with them as 'one of the pivotal experiences of her life' (Hurley: 1989 3). Post spoke with great feeling of the care which Reasie took of her, particularly following her parents' divorce, explaining that Reasie 'comforted me – cared for me – worried about me when I came home on vacations from boarding school. I loved her deeply' (Hurley: 1989 5).

Nan Post supported organised labour and disliked organised religion. Following her divorce, she refused to accept alimony, focusing instead on a career working for Margaret Sanger, the birth control advocate. She felt passionately about this work, which involved travelling long distances to establish health clinics. In so doing, she set Post a positive example of finding work which she felt was meaningful and would effect change. She demonstrated courage, single-mindedness and independence of thought and action. Post described her as 'a crusader type', who was 'socially and politically aware' and who later became 'completely disenchanted with the system' (AG114, box 7, file 4). It is not surprising, then, that 'courage, dedication, strength and compassion' were the qualities which struck Post about her mother (McEuen: 2004 128). Nor is it surprising that Post herself demonstrated these qualities while spending extended periods travelling long distances alone to complete her assignments. Her friend Jack Welpott described her as 'endowed with an excess of courage' (AG114, box 6, file 1).

Education at a progressive boarding school was followed by a year at the New School for Social Research in New York. A decision to train as a teacher prompted a transfer to New York University. Post then moved to Vienna, to study child psychology, joining Helen, who was studying with Austrian photographer Trude Fleischmann. Helen's friend would soon introduce Post to photography and compliment her on her work.

Post travelled home, reluctantly, in 1933, when the situation in Europe became too dangerous for her to remain. Her experiences there were instrumental in shaping her political views, particularly regarding the persecution of minorities. In an interview with Paul Raedeke, she explained how she became involved in political action with the League against War and

Fascism, as a direct result of incidents she had witnessed there, including the burning of swastikas in Austria and hearing Hitler speak in Berlin (AG114 box 6, file 5).

On her return to New York, Post found work in a progressive school. Meanwhile, photography quickly assumed a significant role, as she joined the Photo League and the Group Theater, making many lifelong friends among the radical intellectuals she met there. They would be important, not just in informing her political ideas, but her interest in using formal concerns to convey her political message. During her time with the League, Post attended Ralph Steiner's study group and remembered that she 'participated very seriously and developed a close rapport' with him, while Paul Strand's work also made a 'strong impression' on her (AG114, box 7, file IV). She said of the Photo League and the Group Theater that 'their concern with the growing fascism, the social and economic injustices, were in tune with my own. My social conscience was nourished by them' (AG114, box 7, file I). When Strand and Steiner invited her to become part of the Frontier Films project, *People of the Cumberland*, Post recognised an opportunity to develop her photography within an organisation that shared her radical political beliefs.

Her experience working with Frontier Films reinforced Post's desire to use her developing photographic skills to earn her living. She secured a post at the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin, but quickly became dissatisfied with her responsibilities on the fashion pages. She was fortunate, however. Her mentors, Steiner and Strand, introduced her to Roy Stryker, who offered her a position in the FSA. She began work in September 1938, in a post she was to hold until her marriage three years later.

Post met Lee Wolcott, a deputy director in the Department of Agriculture, in May 1941. They were married six weeks later. Wolcott had two small children from his first marriage; he and Post would add two of their own to the young family. Controversially, Wolcott used his seniority to insist on his wife's married name being used on all photographs taken by her for the FSA; Post's images are therefore attributed to 'Marion Post Wolcott'. I refer to Post by her maiden name, in recognition of her achievements before her marriage.

Feminist critics have persuasively argued that Wolcott forced Post to relinquish her career following their marriage, even though Post describes this decision as hers. All that is certain is that Post did not work professionally during her marriage, but that she did continue to create images reflecting her lifelong commitment to social justice. Wolcott worked for the Agency for International Development (AID) between 1959 and 1968. Post discussed her experiences living abroad in an interview for the Foreign Service Spouses oral history project. In Pakistan, she observed social class operating through the caste system. In Iran, she created an image of two women balancing large water gourds on their head and walking barefoot; an image discussed in chapter two. Evacuated from Cairo during the Six-Day War, Post destroyed most of the images she took there, but recorded her involvement in a birth control project in India.

Moving to California with her newly-retired husband in the early 1970s, Post quickly became 'addicted' to issues such as 'the whale war' and 'the destruction of the Redwoods and the greed and power of the lumber companies' (AG114, box 6, file 8). In notes for her speech accepting the Dorothea Lange Award for Distinguished Women Photographers in 1986, she commented that 'the Ku Klux Klan is on the march again' and that 'the disparity between rich and poor increases alarmingly ... are we becoming a society with a small super-rich elite and a huge under-privileged class?' (AG 114: box 7, reference material). Post's commitment to social justice was undiminished by age. Two years before her death aged 80 in 1990, she said 'I'm not as active as I'd like to be but I guess I'm still a champion of the underdog' (AG 114: box 6, file 7).

Post's correspondence reflects her many close and enduring friendships. She maintained an affectionate correspondence with Steiner and exchanged heartfelt letters on the difficulties of combining career and family life with photographer Margaret McKiechan. Letters from author Paul Hendrikson reveal his warm feelings for her. Writing to Post a few months before her death from cancer, Jack Delano, an old friend from FSA days, told her that it was 'simply too painful for me to think of you in the same situation as was Irene [his wife]. I can only send you my love, best wishes and hope, hope, hope' (AG

114, box 1, file 24). On 24 November 1990, 'the unconquerable Marion' died in Santa Barbara, California (AG 114, box 2, file 31).

'A RADICAL VISION ON FILM': HER WORK

Post's role in the FSA was to help create a photographic record of the social and economic impact of the Depression on the people of the United States and to publicise the Roosevelt Administration's efforts to ameliorate these problems through the New Deal. One of several New Deal agencies, the FSA reflected Roosevelt's essentially liberal political position. Post was directed in her work by Stryker, head of the Historical Section. While Post fulfilled her official remit, however, much of her work pushed the boundaries of conventional FSA documentary. This work reflected her concern with the issues of racial equality and social class. These sensitive issues were not directly addressed by either the New Deal or by most of Post's FSA colleagues. Much of her work was not published at the time because it did not conform to the expectations of Stryker or the FSA. Nor, until recently, did Post receive the scholarly attention her work merits. Not until the 1980s was her work recognised as distinctive. Only in 2004 was it described as 'a radical vision on film' (McEuen: 2004 125)².

Was Post more than a documentary photographer? Of the various attempts to explain her motivations and her work, those offered by revisionist scholars, who suggest Post was an anomalous member of the liberal FSA, are most useful. However, their work does not offer what I believe is a complete analysis of the radical nature of Post's photography. I will therefore reinterpret these revisionist assessments. I will argue that Post was making an appeal for radical action on issues of race and class: she was not simply a left-wing documentarian, but an activist photographer.

I describe Post as a 'radical activist', using 'radical' both in its sense of arising from or returning to the root and in its political meaning; in contradistinction to 'liberal'. As an activist, she both exposed social injustice and called for its abolition. As an activist photographer, Post, like later civil

² Please see the bibliography for full details of all works cited in this thesis.

rights photographers, saw black people 'as actors in their own liberation' (Kelen: 2011 10). She sought to empower blacks and to bring about fundamental change in society, rather than its incremental reform. This distinction will be key to an accurate interpretation of Post's work, particularly in her use of formal techniques.

Re-interpreting Post's photography involves considering various perspectives in her work. One of these is of interest to critical race theorists: can a white photographer ever take photographs of African Americans which demonstrate a similar affinity with her subject as that of a black photographer? Similarly, does a female photographer necessarily have a 'female' perspective and if so, is this demonstrated in Post's work? Finally, while revisionist critics suggest that Post held politically radical views to the left of her FSA colleagues, these beliefs have yet to be more precisely defined.

Various photographic theories can be employed to understand Post's work. Semiotics and the work of Marxists and feminists are helpful. Most useful for the purposes of this study, however, is the work of critical race theorists, intersectionality scholars and critics who have created syntheses from the original work of semioticians, Marxists and feminists. Using Post's photographs as the main primary source is an appropriate methodology for this research. Close analysis of individual images and their examination within complete series (such as Post's work on union activism, on black housing in Washington, DC, and on contrasting black and white communities in Florida) will form a fundamental part of this project. However, I believe that this visual information must be contextualised, considering the temperament and experiences of a photographer whose images revealed both her personality and the historical period in which she lived and worked.

Biographical sources revealing the influences of Post's early life, including her family background and education will be examined, as will information about her young adult years, particularly the significance of the time she spent travelling in Europe, her experience working as a newspaper photographer and her involvement with radical organisations such as the League against War and Fascism, the Group Theater, the Photo League and Frontier Films. It is also useful to compare Post's work with that of other photographers, such as her contemporaries Aaron Siskind, who also belonged

to the Photo League and black government photographers Gordon Parks and Robert H. McNeill. A later photographer, Danny Lyon, who worked for the civil rights movement in the 1960s, shared many of her political and photographic concerns. I will argue that Post had more in common with Lyon than with any other photographer and a close analysis of two of their images forms chapter two.

Post's body of work has received due care from archivists in the United States. Whereas her work with the FSA is incorporated within papers and photographic series held at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, her own papers and many of her photographs are held at the Center for Creative Photography (CCP), University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, which form the key primary source materials for this thesis. Also assessed will be images relating to Lyon's work with the civil rights movement, along with those of Siskind and Parks, held at the CCP. Finally, Post's important film project *People of the Cumberland* (1937) – and still images therefrom – are accessible at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York. All combined, these archival materials constitute an unparalleled source base for explicating, comparing and contrasting the work of a radical photographer working largely within liberal New Deal government contexts – one who stood out from a nearly-exclusive group of men.

* * *

This thesis will examine Post's work on the issues of racial and social equality within the context of her biography. Post's photographs form the main primary source; close analysis of specific images in the context of their series provide the structure of the thesis. I discuss my methodology and primary sources, and review the secondary literature, in Chapter One. Chapter Two is an analysis of what I suggest is an iconic image. Post's still publicity photographs for the Frontier Films production *People of the Cumberland* (1937) and her images of strikes taken for the FSA are considered in Chapter Three. Chapter Four examines her photographs of poor black housing in Washington, DC and her series of contrasting images of migrant labourers and wealthy tourists in Florida. I conclude by reviewing my arguments and discussing how they can be applied to Post's wider work.

CHAPTER ONE

‘A MORE PERSONAL TRUTH’: POST’S POLITICS AND FSA PHOTOGRAPHY

As Paula Tropp observed in a review of an exhibition of Post’s work,

Post Wolcott may have tried to be a team player, but she seems to have been involved in some kind of subconscious subversion. It’s as if she frequently set up her camera for a FSA-shooting script shot, but at the moment of exposure took the more personal truth she so astutely observed (Tropp: nd).

WHITE MAN LOW, BLACK MAN BELOW: AFRICAN AMERICAN POVERTY AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The position of African Americans during the 1930s was one of Post’s central interests and images of them formed a significant, if often unpublished, part of her work. Little has been written about Post’s unpublished images in the literature and there were no references to this aspect of her work in the archives. There is considerable disagreement about the impact of the New Deal on the black community among scholars in the literature. Earlier critics mainly argue that economic gains led to limited improvements for African Americans. There is some overlap between this group of commentators and later critics, who emphasise Roosevelt’s failure to address the central issues of civil rights, such as lynching, segregation and voting rights.

Among the work of early critics, Studs Terkel’s *Hard Times* (1970) stands out as an important example of an oral history project. It is an invaluable source of information on the radical politics of the era, as well as marginal groups such as African Americans and the rural poor, who were of interest to

Post. It also includes an account by C. B. Baldwin, Assistant to Henry A. Wallace, the Secretary of Agriculture, of the impact of the FSA on rural poverty (Terkel interviewed officials, political leaders and intellectuals as well as those affected by the New Deal). The author describes it as a 'memory book, rather than one of hard fact and precise statistic' (Terkel: 1970 3). He acknowledges the limitations inherent in the genre, asking

are they telling the truth? It is the truth for them.... In their rememberings are their truths. The precise fact or the precise date is of small consequence. This is not a lawyer's brief... It is simply an attempt to get the story of the holocaust known as the Depression from an improvised battalion of survivors (Terkel: 1970 3).

Terkel singles out African Americans for particular comment in his introduction, observing that 'even during the Great Depression, when the white man was "lowdown", the black was below whatever that was. This hard fact was constantly sung around, about, under and over in his blues' (Terkel: 1970 7).

This point is reiterated in the text by Clifford Burke, who comments that the African American was born in depression and that the Great Depression only became official when it began to affect the white man. He makes the interesting point that while it was common to hear of white men committing suicide when they lost their jobs, it was rare for an African American to do so because they had so little to start with. Another African American, former sharecropper Emma Tiller, describes the life she and her husband led as a 'horrible way of livin' with almost nothing [which] lasted until Roosevelt' (Terkel: 1970 232). This is echoed by black sociologist Horace R. Cayton, who describes the way 'the WPA came along and Roosevelt came to be a god' (Terkel: 1970 437).

Other interviews of note include one with the activist writer, John Beecher, who worked first on the Resettlement Programme (RA) with Rex Tugwell and later on a programme for black migratory farm workers in Florida. He worked mainly with displaced sharecroppers from Georgia and Alabama, for whom camps, clinics, hospitals and community centres were built. He describes the migratory labour programme as the most advanced initiative he had encountered in the whole Administration, comparing it favourably with the more paternalistic RA. He is interesting on the differences between the two. Candidates for the

resettlement communities were apparently selected according to Washington criteria, while the camps were open to anyone and run by the members themselves. He also comments on the level of white hostility to the initiative. While holding the programme up as an example of local democracy in action, however, Beecher admits that on his return some 30 years later he found people still living there. The New Deal had not made any permanent improvement to these black labourers' lives.

Former farmer Harry Terrell reinforces the idea found elsewhere in the literature of farmers' reluctance to change, commenting that 'the nearer to the ground you get, the nearer you are to conservative' (Terkel: 1970 215). This is reflected in C. B. Baldwin's memories of the RA/FSA. He describes what he saw as the radicalism of the co-operative farm projects and the desire for land ownership of the farmers themselves; echoing Pells' analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Tobacco Road*. He provides useful background on the opposition from large farmers to migratory labour camps in California. He also discusses the FSA photography project, which he calls the agency's 'most lasting contribution...I think it more effectively dramatized the plight of the poor people than anything else done in 30 years. It was accidental. We just happened to hit on the medium' (Terkel: 1970 261-2). Carey McWilliams, former editor of *The Nation*, observed the migration of dust-bowl refugees to California in the mid-1930s and tells us how 'they were promptly stereotyped, exactly like a racial minority. They were called Okies and Arkies: they were shiftless and lazy and irresponsible and had too many children' (Terkel: 1970 243).

Hard Times contributes, too, to the debate about the radical politics of the era. Former Trotskyite leader, Max Shachtman, comments on what he saw as the inherent conservatism of the period, which prevented radicalism from taking 'deep root' in the US. He agrees with Susman that the radical Left became diluted by working with the New Deal and Roosevelt, who 'saved our society in a new bourgeois reform way' (Terkel: 1970 300-301). He concludes that 'today even the New Left looks upon it [the Communist Party] as obsolete, puritanical, conservative, establishment' (Terkel: 1970 300-301).

The development of the literature reveals some overlap in the various schools of thought, particularly in the work of scholars in the 1960s. Thus,

New Left critics such as Barton J. Bernstein (1967) felt that the New Deal had failed African Americans, leaving them, like other marginal groups, excluded from the new order. Bernstein observes that

perhaps this is one of the crueller ironies of liberal politics, that the marginal men trapped in hopelessness were seduced by rhetoric, by the style and movement, by the symbolism of the efforts seldom really reaching beyond words (Quoted by Weiss: 1983 296).

William E. Leuchtenburg, in *Franklin D Roosevelt and the New Deal 1932-1940* (1963), comments that 'most of all, Negroes [sic] swung to Roosevelt because they had been granted relief' (Leuchtenburg: 1963 186-87). While black leaders criticised Roosevelt for his failure to enact civil rights legislation, Leuchtenburg argues that the President was restricted by the need to maintain the support of Southern Congressmen, who might 'kill every economic proposal he asked them to advance', if he also insisted on civil rights legislation (Leuchtenburg: 1963 186). Harvard Sitkoff disagreed. *A New Deal for Blacks* was in 1978 the most thorough study of the subject. Sitkoff argued that the New Deal embraced the cause of civil rights and that it was its positive record in this area which brought African Americans into the Democratic Party.

By the early 1980s, greater consensus was emerging in the literature. Historians such as Nancy Weiss in *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (1983) and J. B. Kirby in *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era: Liberalism and Race* (1980) used new research to suggest that while Roosevelt did provide limited economic benefits to African Americans and that it was these which were instrumental in gaining the black vote for the Democratic Party, he failed to address the issue of civil rights. Weiss is an excellent source for information on the conditions of African Americans during the Depression and for the impact of the New Deal on their lives. Her examination of the reasons for the shift of loyalty to the Democrats helps place specific photographs in historical context. This is particularly true of Post's image of a street scene in Wendell, North Carolina (Figure 1). This image has been the focus of much attention by feminist and other revisionist scholars who emphasise the lack of civil rights as being central to this photograph's meaning. Sally Stein (1983) focuses on the white woman as the centre of this image. She argues that the photograph should be interpreted through the context of the Association of Southern White Women for the Prevention of Lynching. This group drew attention to the way that white women were manipulated by white

men, who emphasised white females as potential victims of male black violence, to justify lynching black men. Both Stein (1983) and Andrea Fisher (1987) interpret the white woman in this photograph as a conduit between the African Americans and the white man in the image. Jacqueline Ellis, however, argues that placing the white woman at the centre of the meaning of the image 'marginalizes African-American identity' (Ellis:1998 78).

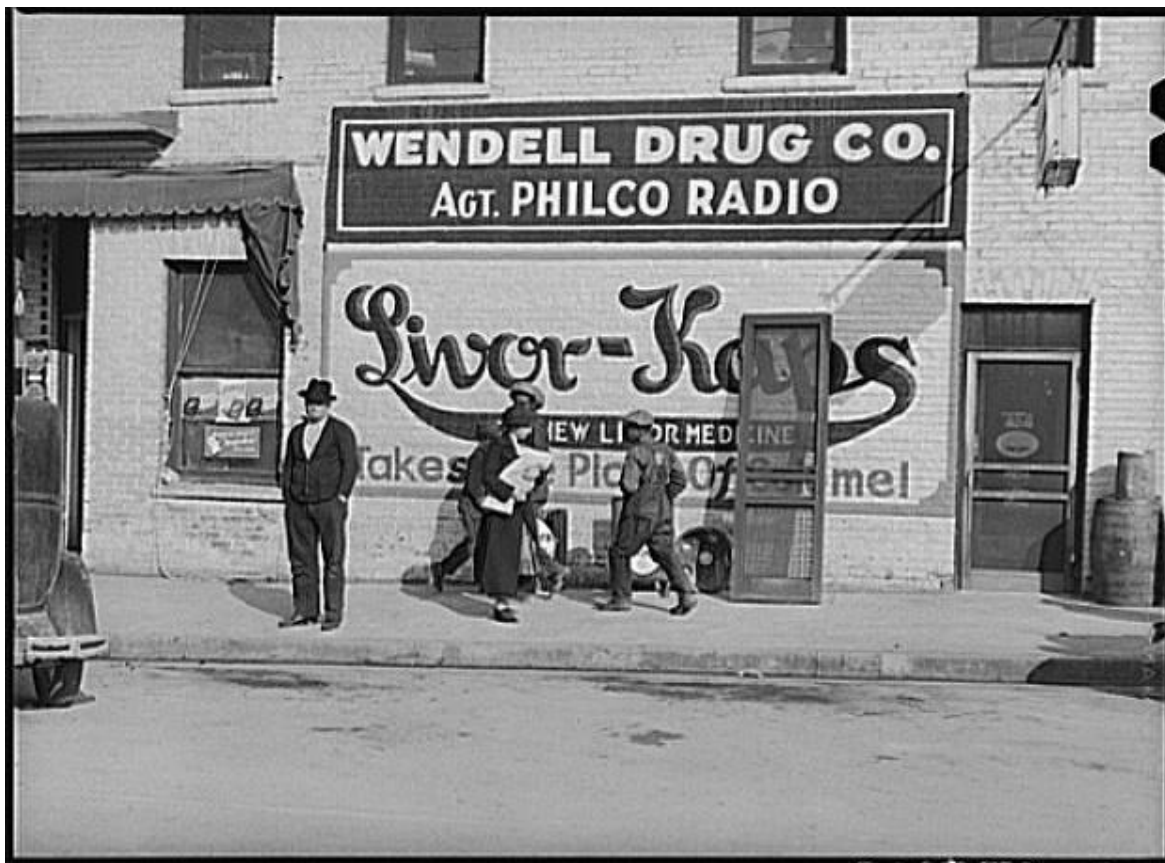


Figure 1. Marion Post. *Advertisement on the Side of a Drug Store, Wendell, North Carolina.*1939.

Weiss deals with several important themes, including African Americans' electoral response to the New Deal; their relationship with the Roosevelts;

the New Deal's record on race; the central role of economic concerns in shaping black behaviour and the impact of the New Deal in politicising blacks as a special interest group. She explains her methodology and acknowledges the limitations of her sources, which limit her enquiry to black voting patterns in the urban north. She concludes that

blacks in northern cities in the 1930s voted Democrat because the New Deal brought them some respite from the Depression. Despite the willingness of the Roosevelt Administration to make some symbolic racial gestures, the race issue never became part of the New Deal agenda. It was Franklin Roosevelt's ability to produce jobs, not his embrace of civil rights, that made him a hero to black America (Weiss: 1983 xvi).

Anthony J. Badger, in *The New Deal: the Depression Years, 1933-40* (1989), concurs. Roosevelt failed to introduce legislation to address segregation or the black vote and while he took a stand against lynching, did not endorse the anti-lynching bill. Badger notes, however, that while Roosevelt did little for black civil rights in the 1930s, the shift of political allegiance from the Republican to the Democratic Party which began in 1936 was indispensable to the later civil rights movement. He suggests that African Americans remained a marginal group during the New Deal and argues that 'to the extent that the New Deal in general failed to protect the poor, blacks as the poorest section of the population were disproportionately affected' (Badger: 1989 252).

It was this marginality which was of interest to Post. Badger discusses the ways in which New Deal programmes directly and indirectly discriminated against African Americans, such as the exclusion of agricultural workers and domestic servants from the National Recovery Administration (NRA) legislation, which effectively meant that 70% of black workers were not covered. Domestic servants, largely ignored by other FSA photographers apart from Parks, featured as the main subjects in several of Post's images, reflecting her interest in this group. Official discrimination which was evident at a national level, such as at the NRA, was equally insidious at the grass-roots. Programmes in the South were run by whites who adhered to the cultural norms of the white population and who perpetuated segregation and inequality, sometimes even excluding blacks altogether.

Like Weiss, Badger feels such criticism should be qualified, pointing out that despite discrimination against African Americans in the South, the New Deal did provide them with more assistance than they had received previously. Significantly, the agencies most important to blacks were increasingly headed by men sympathetic to their cause, such as Will Alexander at the FSA, producing tangible economic benefits for a group previously ignored by welfare agencies. At the FSA, new tenant purchase loans were made in proportion to the African American population in the South (although not in proportion to need) and in the north Harry Hopkins and Aubrey Williams were successful in eradicating discrimination at the Works Progress Administration (WPA). In addition, New Deal liberals became aware that they had to specifically address African American issues. This was because the expansion of jobs available to blacks at the lower federal levels meant that New Deal officials were increasingly vulnerable to criticism by African Americans. In this way, the New Deal helped make civil rights a political issue. Badger also assesses the contribution of the radical Left to the growing civil rights coalition. The Communist Party targeted blacks as potential recruits and defended the Scottsboro boys; socialists took up the cause of black tenant farmers in the South and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) recognised the need to organise black workers. Radical intellectuals 'more and more stressed environment rather than race as the cause of differential achievement' (Badger: 1989 255). Significantly, Badger describes the New Deal as responding to and contributing to a coalition which was led by the radical Left, not by the liberal Roosevelt Administration.

This consensus remains clear in recent scholarship, notably in work by Ira Katznelson (2013), Roger Daniels (2015) and Blanche Wiesen Cook (2000). Katznelson discusses the way

the New Deal permitted, or at least turned a blind eye toward, an organized system of racial cruelty. This alliance was a crucial part of its supportive structure. The New Deal thus collaborated with the South's racial hegemony as it advanced liberal democracy at home and campaigned to promote liberal democracy abroad (Katznelson: 2013 18).

Katznelson describes the South as 'American with a difference'; a region set apart by lack of civil rights for the African American population. As already discussed, Roosevelt failed to enact legislation to criminalise lynching, which was still a significant issue in the 1930s. Indeed, Mississippi, where Post

created her iconic image of the segregated movie theatre discussed in Chapter Two, had the second highest number of lynchings in the South between 1900 and 1930. While Roosevelt was sympathetic to the anti-lynching movement, Katznelson suggests he was restricted by the need to defer to Southern Democrats who formed the majority in the party in both houses of Congress.

Daniels notes that Roosevelt made no mention of African Americans in his second inaugural speech in 1937, observing that

apologists can argue that blacks were surely included in the one-third, but it is quite clear that although Roosevelt understood that they needed special protection, he was not then willing to make that case public and would not do so until his hand was forced some three years later (Daniels: 2015 323).

Similarly, Roosevelt never publicly discussed the reasons for the incarceration of Japanese Americans in 1941-42, but Daniels comments that

we do have a great deal of evidence about his willingness to make pragmatic compromises about other matters of principle in civil rights. As has been shown, when it came to advancing the civil rights of African Americans ... he had often refrained from taking actions that he said he favoured on the grounds that doing so might interfere with congressional and popular support for aspects of his program he deemed more pressing (Daniels: 2015 252).

A Good Neighbor League rally, in New York, in September 1936, exemplifies this. The organisation aimed to 'woo groups that had not traditionally been Democratic but who were seen as potentially supportive of the President' (Schickler: 2016 50). A poster here showed Roosevelt blessing a group of African Americans kneeling at his feet, with the spirit of Abraham Lincoln in the background, invoking images of Lincoln with freed slaves; highly ironic, given Roosevelt's failure to make blacks full and free members of Southern society through civil rights legislation.

Cook goes further, arguing in her biography of Eleanor Roosevelt that the First Lady was an activist who became the President's conscience on divisive issues, such as civil rights. Eleanor Roosevelt felt able to act on her principles, while the President, who shared her views, did not. Cook discusses Eleanor Roosevelt's alliances with race radicals, her friendship with Mary McLeod Bethune and her work with the popular front, which revisionist critics such as Michael Denning recognise as one of the important influences on

1930s culture. The First Lady was also involved with the National Public Housing Conference held in Washington, DC in January 1934.

The conference aimed to improve conditions in the capital's 'alley dwellings' which were also of interest to Post, whose work there is discussed in Chapter Four. Perhaps most significantly, Eleanor Roosevelt became involved in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) campaign to pass anti-lynching legislation (the Wagner-Costigan bill). It seems clear that, while she spoke out on this issue, the President believed that he was restricted by the need to keep the goodwill of Southern Democrats and felt unable to support the bill, explaining that

The Southerners ... occupy strategic places on most of the Senate and House committees. If I come out for the anti-lynching bill now, they will block every bill [needed] to keep America from collapsing (Cook: 2000 181).

Cook argues that Eleanor Roosevelt 'encouraged the civil rights movement' that began to develop during the 1930s, concluding that 'no individual did more to alter the relationship between the New Deal and the cause of civil rights' (Cook: 2000 186). There are parallels between the activism of Eleanor Roosevelt and that of Post; not least in their relationships with men who felt unable to speak out on controversial issues, especially on civil rights. Both contributed to the empowerment of women through their activism and in so doing helped the struggle against injustice. While it was not recognised at the time, Post was, like the First Lady, attempting to change the relationship between the New Deal and civil rights. She tried to encourage the civil rights movement through what I suggest is a canon of activist photographs.

The literature clearly shows that African Americans were disproportionately affected by the Depression. Early works and some later publications suggest limited economic improvements for blacks, which may explain their shift to the Democratic Party. Most later critics, however, emphasise Roosevelt's failure to address the underlying problem of civil rights issues. Roosevelt did not introduce any legislation to deal with segregation or voting rights. Nor did he support the anti-lynching bill. African Americans thus remained a marginal group throughout the New Deal, which not only failed to significantly improve their lives, but both directly and indirectly discriminated against them. There was thus both political failure by central government to

address civil rights and moral failure by the FSA to highlight the specific problems of blacks in society. These failures were clear to Post and motivated her to take some of her most striking images.

A RHETORIC OF RECRUITMENT? PROBLEMS OF MEANING AND METHODOLOGY IN DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Understanding these images raises many questions, as it does with all documentary photography. There is a vast literature which attempts to address this problem of interpretation. The most useful theorists to consider are those who address issues of meaning from a perspective similar to Post's own. While semioticians are useful, the work of scholars influenced by Marxism, feminism and critical race theory is more closely aligned to the views and interests of Post herself.

According to the semiotician Roland Barthes, all images are polysemous. This presents a problem for the reader, who is faced with multiple potential meanings among a chain of signifiers. One of the main functions of the linguistic message - the text within, or caption accompanying, the image - is therefore to anchor the image by fixing the signifiers. In *Rhetoric of the Image* (1977), Barthes examines what he describes as the denoted, or literal, text. This is represented for example by Post's caption for her image of an African American man entering a segregated movie theatre (Figure 2). This photograph, which I argue is an iconic image, is discussed further in Chapter Two. Its use here, as elsewhere in this thesis, reflects its value as an image which represents Post's qualities as an activist photographer. Post created more than 30,000 images while working for the FSA. This study is therefore necessarily highly selective and the images discussed have, like Figure 2, below, been included for their representative qualities.



Figure 2. Marion Post. *Negro Man Entering Movie Theater by Outside Entrance to Upstairs 'Colored' Section, Belzoni, Mississippi. 1939.*

At this literal level, the caption is a description of the image, which enables the reader to contextualise it in time and space. Thus, Post's caption informs us that this image was taken in a small town in a state in the Deep South of the United States, toward the end of the Depression, at a time when segregation was still in place. 'Negro' also allows twenty-first century readers to place the photograph historically. If we accept Barthes' interpretation, however, a certain level of historical and cultural knowledge is required to interpret even the denoted text of the caption. As we shall see in Chapter Two, Post's use of the term 'Negro' conveys very clearly her close identification with the African American population, but this is only obvious to a viewer with historical knowledge of this period. This caption also helps the reader interpret the image at the connotative, or symbolic, level. It therefore has a controlling function, repressing some interpretations and clarifying others. Its main function at this level may be ideological; here, the caption makes clear both the dominant societal ideology and that of the photographer. Importantly, these are

in direct opposition. However, it is Post's deliberate placement of the figure of the black man below the text of the Dr Pepper advertisement *within* the image which reinforces her ideological position; this is to some extent only suggested by her caption, as explained above.

Post made several other interventions in this photograph, resulting in a highly coded, symbolic work. The image was timed so that the shadow falls across the clock at ten and four, echoing the contemporary slogan, 'Drink a bite to eat at 10, 2 and 4 o'clock'. Again, Post's irony leaves us in no doubt that the signifiers in the image connote her opposition to the dominant ideology. The shock produced by the Dr Pepper advertisement comes from its being a discordant element in the image. Barthes calls this the 'punctum'. This is a detail which disturbs the unary space, or 'studium', of the image. Here, it is produced by the juxtaposition of the text of the advertisement, informing readers that it is 'Good for life!', with the solitary black figure climbing the stairs towards the segregated entrance to the movie theatre. This is one of several details which makes this image noteworthy. Without it, this photograph of an African American in the segregated South would still convey cultural and historical information to the reader. However, it would lack the shock which indicates the photographer's point of view and, most importantly for an activist photographer, strongly encourages our empathy with her subject. While Barthes believes a punctum does not usually work if it is consciously added by the photographer, its deliberate inclusion in this image is highly effective. Its use here clearly suggests both Post's own emotional response to the scene and her desire to elicit an emotional response from the viewer. It emphasises her juxtaposition of a dystopian reality with an imagined utopian future: she believes in the viewer's ability to transform their opinion and work for social and political change.

Barthes' final work marked a return to realism. *Camera Lucida* (1980) thus seems to be more relevant to the documentary impulse than *The Rhetoric of the Image*. Barthes insists that we cannot deny the referent, which in photography has a unique form, differing from painting and other systems of representation because it is inherently less fictive. The referent, then, is the essential feature of photography. While a painting cannot compel the viewer to believe that something has existed, the unique power of photography is that someone has seen the referent. As the photograph of William Casby (Figure 3) in *Camera Lucida*

confirms the existence of slavery, so Post's image informs us that segregation once existed in the Southern United States. As, indeed, it exists in different form today, the election of the first black president notwithstanding. Michelle Alexander explains the racialised systems of slavery, segregation and mass incarceration as systems which have evolved to achieve the continued control of African Americans; black still represents the 'other'.

The main function here is therefore one of authentication. However, while Post's image authenticates, it is most importantly also tendentious; it confirms the historical fact of segregation, but very clearly also shows us her point of view, through the interventions she makes in the photograph. Post's stand on segregation and the formal and aesthetic techniques she employed to express it in this image are examined more fully in chapter two, where I argue that this is an iconic image, which may be interpreted as an example of an activist photograph, created by an activist photographer.

This examination of Barthes' ideas clearly demonstrates that semiotics alone does not provide an effective tool with which to interpret Post's photography. Her point of view was clearly radical and I argue that she was not simply recording the fact of segregation, but making an appeal for action to dismantle it. The impact of her images upon her audience was therefore very important, both to her and to us, if we are to fully understand her work. It is therefore important to consider the contribution to the debate of contemporary Marxist critics, such as Walter Benjamin, and later theorists influenced by him. Among the most important of these were Allan Sekula, Martha Rosler and John Berger. Critical race theory and intersectionality are also important.

Benjamin's critique of the liberal humanist documentary form influenced the new social documentary developed by New Left commentators. In *The Author as Producer* (1934), he argues that the New Objectivity in photography had turned poverty into something to be enjoyed, while the political function of photography to renew the world was being ignored. Post's work formed part of this wider debate about the nature and function of photography. Figure 2, above, in particular, is aesthetically pleasing, with the clean lines, flat style and symmetry of modernism. Yet for Post this formalism was not an end in itself;

she used it, rather, to engage the viewer and gain their support for her radical stance on a controversial and relatively unexplored political subject. Importantly, she appealed to the viewer not to sympathise with her subjects, but to empathise with them. This distinction is significant, as it confirms that Post was not part of the liberal documentarian tradition of her colleagues in the FSA. Nor was she part of an exploitative tradition exemplified by some liberal documentarians such as Margaret Bourke-White. Indeed, she has done as Benjamin demands and written a caption for the image, preventing it being interpreted by purely aesthetic criteria.

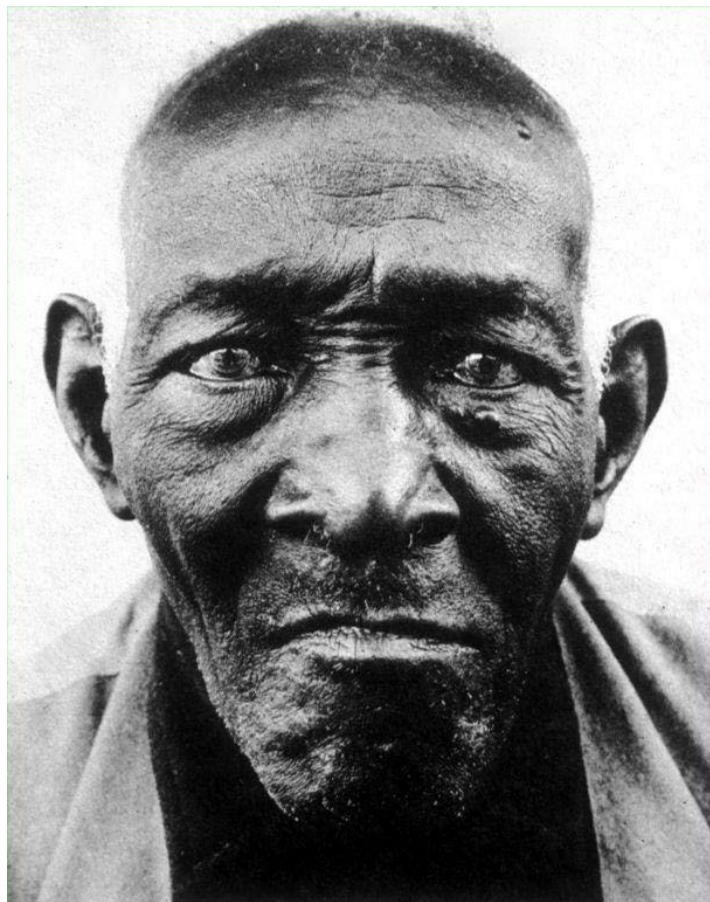


Figure 3. Richard Avedon. *William Casby, Born in Slavery, Algiers, Louisiana*. 1963.

Benjamin believed that the reproducibility of photographs was democratising. It enabled a move away from tradition, towards the visual dissemination of ideas to a mass audience for the first time. It reflected the increasing importance of the masses, both as viewers and subjects, and was part of a move towards socialism in which the collective experience of viewing

images prompted a more progressive view of art. Post's work is situated within and informed by this new tradition. Her choice of photography as the medium through which she expressed her ideas, her working class, often black, subjects and willingness to engage in political debate, all suggest the radical sensibility discussed above.

Like other Marxist critics, Benjamin was also interested in realism. The assumption that photography was inherently realistic corresponded with Marx's own preference for realism in literature and painting, while also suggesting that photographs provided evidence of real history, of people in their material circumstances. Photography provided permanent images which could become material objects of exchange, capturing the historical process for the first time. Benjamin saw photography as the first revolutionary means of production, invented at the same time as socialism and with potential for revolutionising the function of art.

As noted, Benjamin's ideas informed the work of many later critics, including Sekula. In his influential essay 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning' (1975), Sekula argues that photographic meaning is not intrinsic but subject to cultural definition. He defines photographic discourse as an arena of information exchange, or communication, whose limiting function determines the possibilities of meaning. Since all communication is tendentious to some extent, we can therefore assume that the photograph embodies an incomplete argument or message, which depends on cultural context for its readability. If we accept this fundamental premise, then we cannot read universal meaning in the photograph. If meaning is culturally dependent it also follows that it must be understood at the level of connotation suggested by Barthes.

This leads to the issue of how to interpret the image. Sekula suggests we need to develop a historical knowledge of the emergence of sign systems in order to understand the conventions of the photographic message. He describes this as a historically grounded sociology of the image in both high art and in the culture more widely. Reading this image by Post, then, does require the semiotic approach put forward by Barthes. This alone is not sufficient, however, for as Sekula reminds us, Barthes pointed out the polysemous nature of the photograph. The image alone carries only the possibility of meaning. According to Sekula then, no image can be said to exist in a vacuum and its

meaning will vary depending on its situation in different discourses. If we are to use Sekula's model to look for meaning in Post's image of an African American man entering a movie theatre, we need to know, first, where it was published. This presents us with a problem, for while the ostensible nature of the FSA discourse may have been government reform, this image may have been used for other, possibly subversive, purposes. Alternatively, as with many of her other images, it may not have been published at all at the time. This approach, while useful, does not acknowledge that the photograph as it stands still has something to say to us. According to Bathes, the referent remains.

Sekula develops these arguments further in his essay 'Reading an Archive: Photography between Capital and Labour' (1983). His analysis of mining photographs is useful because it deals with working class subjects and issues of power and class which also interested Post. Sekula suggests that archival arrangements reflect bourgeois culture and that the unity and meaning of the collection is imposed by the owner and may change when ownership is transferred. We may apply some of Sekula's observations about this collection to the FSA archive as originally conceived and the different uses to which FSA photographs were put over time; it is also useful to consider his thoughts in relation to Alan Trachtenberg's later interpretation of the FSA archive, 'From Image to Story: Reading the file' (1988).

Building upon the theoretical proposition that images have no inherent truth and that meaning depends on context, Sekula argues that 'meaning is always directed by layout, captions, text and site and mode of presentation' (Sekula in Wells: 1983 445). Since archives tend to suspend meaning, meaning exists in a state which is both residual and potential. Past uses co-exist with potential new ones. Examples of changes in use over time include images in a photographic agency file being used at the time they were created by journalists and later, for different purposes, by historians; in the same way that images from the FSA archive have been used. Yet Sekula argues that while they may appear neutral, archives reflect the power and language of institutions and are organised on bureaucratic lines. They are thus contradictory in nature, since 'within their confines meaning is liberated from use, and yet at a more general level an empiricist model of truth prevails' (Sekula in Wells: 1983 446). Photographic books and exhibitions often reproduce the archival scheme, allowing the editor or curator to claim that they

are reflecting a neutral way of organising the material, while actually maintaining the point of view of the archive.

Sekula also considers the use of the mining photographs as historical documents and as aesthetic objects. This question forms part of the wider photographic debate of which Post is a part. Many pictorial histories become reductive, reproducing and reaffirming established bourgeois culture. It is thus important for historians to acknowledge their original use. This makes clear the inherent bias in FSA photographs, whose original purpose was publicity for government reform. Given that much of Post's work fell outside her official remit, we must consider how far her work is typical of the rest of the archive, and try to determine to what use, if any, it was originally put. It seems likely that this image, like many of hers, remained unpublished, so it may not reflect the bias of the FSA or indeed any contemporary use at all: in which case, what meaning can we ascribe to it, using Sekula's theory?

Sekula suggests that if photographs are presented uncritically as historical documents, there is a danger that they will be transformed into aesthetic objects, even if there is a residual pretence of historical understanding. Such might be the fate of Post's image, visually attractive and viewed out of historical context almost 80 years after it was created, unless we argue that form is meaning. Alternatively, we might ignore this photograph's historical meaning and view it simply on aesthetic grounds. This dilemma reflects the contradictory nature of photography, which seems suspended between what Sekula calls science and the myth of objective truth on the one hand and art and the cult of subjective experience on the other. Sekula suggests that photographic discourse lies between the two. To acknowledge the photograph as art would be to affirm the survival of human creativity under the impact of mechanisation and to suggest that subjectivity and the machine are compatible. Since photography's position in middle-class culture appears so problematic however, Sekula suggests we consider it instead from the perspective of materialist culture history, rather than art history. We need to rethink the way we analyse images, and we can best do this by reading them from below.

This relationship between photographic meaning and social class also concerns Rosler. In her essay 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)' (1981), Rosler argues that documentary

photography has 'come to represent the social conscience of liberal sensibility presented in visual imagery' (Rosler: 1981 176). She cites early documentarians such as Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, who argued for reform within existing social structures, rather than radical change in social relations. Indeed, their work was as much about awakening the self-interest of the privileged classes as it was about helping the underclass and it reflected the influences of moralism and Christian ethics, rather than revolutionary politics. Interestingly, in view of Post's involvement in what other scholars believe was a radical group, Rosler claims that 'even the bulk of the work of the... Photo League of the Depression era shared in the muted rhetoric of the popular front' (Rosler: 1981 177). The role of social documentary, then, is simultaneously to assuage the viewer's conscience and to reassure them about their own social position, reflecting Rosler's belief that 'documentary, as we know it, carries (old) information about a group of powerless people to another group addressed as socially powerful' (Rosler: 1981 179).

Rosler goes on to make some observations about meaning and aesthetics in the work of Dorothea Lange which we might usefully consider in relation to Post. She suggests that the documentary image has two moments; an immediate, instrumental one, in which the ideological message is of most significance and, later, an aesthetic-historical one in which formal concerns dominate. At this point, the image is ahistorical in its denial of specific historical meaning (although an awareness of the time in which it was made is retained). This would mean, however, that there was no 'dialectical relation between political and formal meaning' (Rosler: 1981 186). Rosler says that she

would argue against the possibility of a non-ideological aesthetic; any response to an image is inevitably rooted in social knowledge – specifically, in social understanding of cultural products (Rosler: 1981 186).

Rosler suggests that it was just such an understanding which Lange sought. Post seems to have been striving for a similar understanding in *Negro Man Entering a Movie Theater*. While the image is undoubtedly aesthetically striking, our cultural knowledge also enables us to respond to the ideological message conveyed by its formal qualities. Rosler suggests there is a problem with this idea in practice since ideas about aesthetics change over time and historical interests, not universal truths, seem to dictate whether any specific formal style is considered to satisfactorily reveal its meaning. She comments that 'it seems clear that those

who, like Lange ... identify a powerfully conveyed meaning with a primary sensuousness are pushing against the gigantic ideological weight of classical beauty' (Rosler: 1981 186). If this mutability, as Rosler claims, accounts for the inclusion of some lesser photographers such as Riis alongside others such as Hine, it might also explain why there was relatively little scholarly interest in Post's work until the work of revisionist critics in the 1980s.

Rosler examines the ways in which the credibility of the image has been undermined by the discourse of both the left and, particularly, the right, which has appropriated photographic understanding for a gallery-visiting elite. As a result, photographic meaning has been aestheticised and the link between images and ideology severed. Rosler concludes that contemporary documentary has nothing to say about social relations, offering only generalisations about the human condition which, by definition, cannot be changed and that

perhaps a radical documentary can be brought into existence. But the common acceptance of the idea that documentary precedes, supplants, transcends, or cures full, substantive social activism is an indicator that we do not yet have a real documentary (Rosler: 1981 196).

What does this say about Post? Perhaps that she had already brought a radical documentary into existence 40 years earlier?

If so, then clearly neither semiotics nor Marxist theory reveals it. Later work, by critics attempting to create new syntheses from existing theoretical systems, has provided more useful interpretive models. This group of theorists includes Victor Burgin, John Tagg, John Berger, Laura Mulvey, Susan Sontag, and their followers. Semiotics was criticised by later scholars for its failure to address the effects of the image on the audience; as discussed, this is a fundamental aspect of the work of an activist photographer such as Post. Some critics therefore began to apply psychoanalysis in conjunction with semiotics as a means of analysing audience response to the photograph. In his essay 'Looking at Photographs' (1982), Burgin shows how a synthesis of these theories can be used for a more complete analysis of a photograph. His close analysis of *General Wavell Watches his Gardener at Work* (1941) (Figure 4) draws upon both theories, enabling him to examine the structure of representation of the image and the ideological and subjective point of view offered to the reader.



Figure 4. James Jarche. *General Wavell Watches his Gardener at Work*. 1941

Burgin uses semiotic theory to show us how the ideological message of the image is transmitted through connotations suggesting racism, imperialism and oppositions such as capital/labour and is anchored by the caption. He then includes film theory developed by Mulvey to suggest that we might also interpret the psychoanalytic effect of the image on the viewer. Mulvey is a feminist writer, influenced by feminist and psychoanalytical theories. Her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), uses Freudian theories about voyeurism to explore the objectification of women in cinema.

Burgin's model can usefully be applied to Post's photograph of two black maids in Port Gibson, Mississippi (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Marion Post. *Two Colored Maids on a Street Corner with White Child in Stroller, Port Gibson, Mississippi. 1940.*

The ideological message of this image is carried by signs connoting issues related to domestic labour and race in the Southern states and reinforced by the caption's explicit references to colour and to geographical and temporal location. The image becomes more interesting, however, when we examine the way its subjects interact. No-one in this photograph looks directly at the photographer/viewer. Both maids direct their attention to the child, who is ostensibly the focus of the image and who looks past the camera. Burgin describes how the ideological message of the General Wavell image is the more powerful for being contained in an apparently ingenuous scene. Post also presents us with a seemingly innocent image. Its strong ideological message is

contained in the looks of the two African American women, who assume that it is the child who interests the photographer. In fact, it is their condition, relatively unexamined by other FSA photographers, which preoccupies Post. By using two theoretical models, Burgin created a synthesis which is a more relevant model for analysing Post's work.

Other critics creating new syntheses using semiotics include Tagg. In his introduction to *The Burden of Representation* (1988), Tagg contests the realist position to which Barthes returned in *Camera Lucida*, proposing instead a theory of photography based on the history of discourses and the institutions in which they appear. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser, as well as the codes of semiotics, he argues that a photograph only has meaning within the signifying discourses which use it and that, therefore, photography as such has no identity.

Tagg shows how photography developed alongside new institutions as a tool of surveillance and governance. Specifically, he describes the documentary of the 1930s as a response to a crisis not only of social and economic relations but of representation. It is in the context of a liberal corporatist plan to alleviate this crisis through limited structural reform that we should read the FSA photographs. While acknowledging that documentary employed realist modes and practices, Tagg therefore asks us to consider it in relation to a paternalistic New Deal which sought to establish power through social relations of dependency and consent. Documentary thus achieved its particular power in the 1930s through a combination of new technology, rhetoric and social strategy.

If we accept, like Tagg and Sekula, that photographs have no intrinsic truth and depend for their meaning on the cultural and institutional contexts in which they were produced, what conclusions can we draw about Post's work? Clearly, some of her output conformed to and reflected the political culture of the FSA. However, Tagg's proposition assumes that the work of the photographer reflects only organisational culture. It takes no account of the photographer as an individual who brings to their work their own political and cultural background and their own interests and motivations (and his view of the New Deal is in any case arguable). Several FSA photographers, most notably Post, were highly individualistic and pursued their own agendas as well

as those dictated by Stryker. Post's photograph of the man entering the movie theatre is one of many images which reflect her own interests, in terms of both subject and formal concerns. This photograph very clearly derives its meaning from what we know about the photographer, rather than from the institution in which she worked. Tagg's thesis is therefore not a wholly satisfactory tool for analysing the work of a photographer whose interests did not coincide neatly with those of her organisation.

We might more usefully turn to Berger, whose *Ways of Seeing* (1972) shows the influence of several theoretical traditions, most notably Marxism and feminism. Berger's work reflects the importance of Benjamin's ideas about the mystique of art and the democratising effect of photography. He discusses the relationship between class, education and familiarity with art and the way in which art historically served the interests of the ruling classes; a function which disappeared when the camera made images reproducible. Following Benjamin and Sekula, Berger examines how the reproducibility of images allows them to be used for a variety of purposes and so to acquire different meanings which depend on context, series and textual framing. This loss of authenticity has made images not only ubiquitous and valueless, but available for the masses. Berger, like Barthes, suggests that the lost authority of art has been replaced by a language of images, with what is important now being who uses it and for what purpose.

Berger's emphasis on the photographer's individual vision, or way of seeing, is also fundamental to our analysis of the highly individualistic Post. He discusses the way this vision is reflected in the photographer's choice of subject and how it has become accepted as an important part of the meaning of the image. Thus, Post's image of a black man in the segregated South becomes a statement of her political position. In departing from her official brief, she also tells us something about her personality. This is a more rewarding approach to her work than attempting to interpret it solely through the culture of her commissioning organisation. Determining the nature of Post's highly individual way of seeing will therefore be an integral part of our examination of her work.

It is helpful to consider some examples from Post's early work. In September 1938, she took several images of black boys playing on the Columbus

Monument in Washington, DC (I examine another photograph from this series in Chapter Four). I suggest that Figures 6 (a), (b) and (c) illustrate Post's highly personal 'way of seeing' at an early stage in her career. Figure 6 (c) is especially noteworthy, showing two white boys playing with the black boys. There are few such images in FSA photography. This shows Post's awareness not only of the issues of civil rights, but of the potential for a positive relationship between the races. Post's formal concerns are also evident here. They became fundamental to her expression of her radical political views and her appeal for action against social and racial injustice.



Figure 6 (a). Marion Post. *Colored boys playing on Columbus Monument*. Washington, DC. September 1938.



Figure 6 (b). Marion Post. *Swimming in fountain across from Union Station*. Washington, DC. September 1938.



Figure 6 (c). Marion Post. *Untitled* [related to Figure 6 (b)]. September 1938.

Post's way of seeing may owe something to her role as a female photographer. Berger shared the interest of scholars such as Sontag and Mulvey in the application of feminist and psychoanalytic theories to the interpretation of visual imagery. In his chapter on the male gaze, he examines the differences in the social presence of men and women, suggesting that while male presence is defined by power and action, a woman is passive and defined by what can be done to her. Relating this to Post's man entering the movie theatre, it seems clear that because of the position of African Americans in white society, the presence of this black man is more like that of a white woman. It will be important to determine whether this representation reflects the empathy which, for example, many female members of the Photo League were said to have felt for African Americans; to determine whether a white female gaze makes a difference.

Mulvey's highly influential essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), shaped the way critics such as Burgin and Berger thought about the photographic image. She deals primarily here with the male gaze and the active male and passive female protagonist. 'Afterthoughts' (1981) examines the issues of the female spectator and protagonist. I have already suggested that the female gaze is significant. It is also important to consider the fact that many of Post's subjects were female. In her image of the two black maids, the viewer is asked to identify with female subjects portrayed by a female photographer. Although the maids direct their attention to the child, the photographer's concern is with the two women. This female photographer appears to have an affinity with her subjects which she wishes us to share. As a female and a documentary photographer, she seeks in this photograph to reveal a truth about these women's lives, not to objectify them.

Mulvey's concerns were shared by Sontag. In her introduction to *Women* (1999), Sontag discusses the role of the male gaze and male ideals of feminine beauty in objectifying women. Historically, some female photographers have also been guilty of perpetuating these stereotypes; Sontag describes Julia Margaret Cameron conforming to this quest for beauty in her female subjects, while seeking men who were distinguished by character or achievement. However, Post was clearly concerned with revealing character,

thus treating her female subjects in a manner usually reserved for men. As Sontag concludes, while photography has done much to reinforce stereotypes it can also engage in complicating and subverting them; the work of photography being to reveal, not to present ideals. While this is particularly true of documentary photography, some FSA photographers have been accused of idealising or stereotyping their subjects, perhaps reflecting the values of their organisation in so doing. Post can be distinguished from many of her colleagues in this respect. Her photograph of the two black maids, in particular, represents her commitment to raising questions about subjects overlooked by other photographers.

Looking at the Overlooked (1990) is also Norman Bryson's concern. In his introduction to the four essays in this book, Bryson argues that still life exists at an interface between three zones; the material domestic life of the household; the signs or symbols which relate this through discourse to the cultural concerns of among other things ideology, gender and class; and the material practice of painting with its own semiotic practices. 'Still life and "feminine" space' (1990) discusses the ways in which the distinction between the 'low-plane' reality of still life and the higher genres of painting (megalography) reflect gender positions and ideology. This is relevant because it addresses some of the questions raised by Post's interest in domestic interiors (in her Gee's Bend series, for example) and in the position of women involved in domestic life, especially her images of black domestic servants.

Bryson's examination of two paintings by Diego Velazquez, both popularly known as *The Black Servant*, is of particular interest. Bryson argues that they demonstrate the irrelevance of high-plane reality and megalography to the excluded classes. In one version of the painting (Figure 7), the black maid and her domestic surroundings are foregrounded, suggesting that the values of still life take precedence over those of the religious theme in the history painting in the background, which shows the supper of Emmaus. This seems to be confirmed in the second version, where the painting in the background has disappeared altogether. Bryson believes that the traditionally overlooked subject is the main subject in this image. This has obvious relevance for our analysis of Post's two black maids, excluded as they are by race, class and occupation. Like Velazquez's servant, they are objects to be used; here, two women in the service of one small white child. Like the servant

in his painting they direct their attention downwards, towards their work, ironically unaware that it is they who are the artist's subject.



Figure 7. Diego Velazquez. *Kitchen Maid with Supper at Emmaus* ('The black servant'). 1615.

Still life has traditionally been regarded as an appropriate genre for female artists, placing them on the lowest level in the hierarchy of artistic expression, below male artists working on the great themes of history, mythology and religion and below landscape and portraiture. Bryson suggests this stems from women's perceived inability to abstract from the detail which is one of the main attributes of still life. This has led to a division between roles assumed to be inherently male or female, with only the male artist considered to possess the ability to engage with abstract thought, leading to the equation of great art with the male artist. Art historian Linda Nochlin describes how this belief was challenged in the discourse of the early feminist art movement, which challenged the male-oriented idea of cultural greatness. Nochlin observes that 'at its strongest, a feminist art history is a transgressive and anti-establishment practice meant to call many of the major precepts of the discipline into question' (Nochlin: 2006 320). While megalography remains the sphere of the male artist, who is concerned with exploring great ideas and themes, still life, with its emphasis on particularity, is the province of the female. The domestic space with which it is

concerned is portrayed as both alien and fascinating to men and is seen through the values of the men who controlled painting. Bryson notes that

as the category of the nude pictured woman's body from the outside and re-fashioned it according to the logic of another point of view, so still life pictured the space of women from the outside and imposed on it the values of another world (Bryson: 1990 178).

This raises interesting questions about Post's role as a female photographer, including whether these stereotypes applied to the relatively new medium of photography and the extent to which they prevailed in the 1930s. Certainly, Post's behaviour and freedom of movement while she was on assignments were constrained by Stryker because she was female. Her official brief was also restrictive, emphasising the landscapes which Stryker hoped would show an America recovering from the Great Depression and which Post described as 'cheesecake' (Hurley: 1989 79). As we have seen, she was not encouraged to explore the wider, underlying issues of racism and segregation. Pressure from the FSA and Stryker clearly existed to conform to expectations about subject matter. Significantly, when she did choose to take photographs of feminine space, such as the domestic interiors at Gee's Bend or of black domestic labour, it was to abstract from the particular to the big issues of racism and segregation; that is, to issues of public space.

Critical race theory is also highly relevant to Post's work. Originating in the 1970s, this is related to several earlier movements, including radical feminism and the civil rights thinking of both Martin Luther King and the Black Power Movement. Significantly, critical race theory embraces activism; it seeks not just to understand, but to make the type of radical change which Post sought. Like Post, critical race theorists regard incremental liberal reform as inadequate and argue from a materialist position. As Richard Delgado explains, 'one needs to change the physical circumstances of minorities' lives before racism will abate...one takes seriously matters like unions' (Delgado: 2012 25). As we shall see, Post's strong views on unionisation were reflected in her work for Frontier Films and for the FSA. Her images included African American and Mexican miners and their families. She was conscious of the impact of capitalism on family life. A further central tenet of critical race theory is the belief that racial minority status confers 'a presumed competence to speak about race and racism' (Delgado: 2012 10). However, I argue that Post's voice

was closely aligned to that of black photographers; reflecting her empathy with her black subjects and her wish that they enact their own liberation.

I suggest we can therefore apply the work of critical race theorist Leigh Raiford to a white photographer in the 1930s. As Raiford explains, King recognised the importance of photography in exposing white violence, which was 'imprisoned in a luminous glare' by images revealing 'the naked truth to the whole world' (King: 1967 30). Raiford observes that 'the visual proved a tool as effective as bus boycotts and as righteous as nonviolence' (Raiford: 2011 2). She further argues that such images became icons contributing to the formation of a new racial identity. I suggest that Post, like these black activists, recognised the power of photography 'to challenge dominant representations of African Americans as ignorant, poor, and unfit for citizenship and simultaneously be used to visually assert an image of worth, dignity and self-possession' (Raiford: 2011 9). Raiford explains how activist photographs of the 1960s revealed much about different political platforms of each movement and I argue that Post's work likewise reveals her agenda. Raiford also discusses how lynching photographs became iconic images when used by black activists. As I shall argue in chapter two, Post similarly uses an iconic image of a black man suffering as a call to action. Like Danny Lyon, Post represents a shift from 'the photograph enlisted as documentary evidence to the photograph cast as part of a performative ensemble' (Raiford: 2011 20).

Intersectionality scholars have also made a vital contribution to this debate. Lynn Weber explains that discrimination – and, importantly, resistance to it – is experienced both by individuals and by groups. Post was an 'outsider within'; gaining knowledge of a dominant group 'without gaining the full power accorded members of the groups' (Weber: 2010 6). A white, educated, middle-class woman, entering a group dominated by white, educated, middle-class men, she was privileged by race, education and social class, yet disadvantaged by gender. Stryker controlled her personal life in a way he did not seek to do with her male colleagues. He also paid her less than them. Weber believes this 'served as a mechanism for exerting control over women both by denying them access to wage work and by justifying lower wages to women' (Weber: 2010 36). Post therefore simultaneously occupied dominant and subordinate positions. Yet, both individuals and groups resist. Post's

determination to create a meaningful life meant refusing to conform to expected behaviour. Post often felt lonely – and sometimes afraid – during her extended periods in the unfamiliar South. Like her mother, however, she understood that her mobility enabled her to carry out work which she hoped would empower others.

It seems clear that a methodology for understanding Post's work will involve applying the theories of critics whose interests most closely reflect those of Post herself. Berger's work develops that of earlier Marxist thinkers, notably Benjamin. His interest in the democratising effects of photography, the 'gaze' of the photographer and the importance of the personal vision of the photographer are integral to interpreting Post's work. Sontag and Mulvey, with their emphasis upon feminism, are also central when considering a female photographer working in a predominantly male environment. The application of critical race theory and intersectionality to Post's work will also be crucial. These important theorists and theories will be central to our understanding of Post and her work.

This methodology emphasises the primacy of the images themselves. This follows new ways of thinking about photography first theorised in the 1980s, which coincided with later interpretations of Post's work. One of the main proponents of the new approach was James Curtis. In *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (1989), Curtis proposes a move away from the reliance upon written sources and oral history which had traditionally dominated attempts to analyse documentary photography. Describing interviews, in particular, as being unreliable sources, due to the length of time which frequently elapses between the period under discussion and the time of the interview, Curtis argues for 'a new methodology for visual analysis', which emphasises the images themselves as the main primary source for the historian (Curtis:1989 preface).

Contemporaries of Curtis who contributed to this new methodology include Alan Trachtenberg (1988). Like Curtis, Trachtenberg emphasises the importance of interpreting images in the context of the series in which they were created. In his essay 'From Image to Story: Reading the File', Trachtenberg analyses the FSA file, which he suggests can be read as a series. Trachtenberg warns, however, that it should not be assumed that this

file is arranged in a neutral sequence, for it ‘embodies the era’s ideology of human history as “universal” and “progressive”’; a reference to New Deal ideology (Trachtenberg: 1988 45). Trachtenberg explains that we need to consider the file as an ‘intellectual construction one that stands as a massive presence between the tens of thousands of single images it contains and the meaningful stories these images might tell’ (Trachtenberg: 1988 45). To read the images, we must not take previous interpretations for granted, but re-interpret them for ourselves. He suggests that ‘instead of seeking the perfect meaning of single images, we should focus on the actual work of the photographers, their discoveries, their inventions, their reflections upon their activity’ (Trachtenberg: 1988 51). We need, then, to read individual series in the context of the photographers who contributed to the master file.

However, since it is clear that Post’s photographs were highly personal and derive their meaning from what we know about her, as much as what we know about the FSA, it is necessary to contextualise this visual evidence. I therefore propose to use this methodology in the context of the life experiences which influenced Post’s development as a socially concerned photographer.

‘PART OF A MUCH LARGER THING’: A SOCIALLY CONCERNED PHOTOGRAPHER

Examining these life experiences reveals much in her childhood and early adulthood which influenced her, not least the political and cultural milieu in which she spent her formative years. While some early work identifies a conservative trend in the politics and culture of the period, later critics, notably Michael Denning, argue more credibly that a radical culture emerged in the 1930s. Post’s work was both informed by and reflected this culture. It was as a child that she first became aware of race and class, the issues which would become central concerns to her and would inform what I argue is her work as a socially concerned, activist photographer, whose work presaged that of the civil rights photographers of the 1960s.

The significance of these issues in Post’s early life has been examined by several revisionist historians who have reinterpreted her work. The work of

Melissa McEuen (2004), who notes the influence of Post's remarkable mother, is particularly useful. McEuen describes Nan Post as 'an idealistic woman who supported racial equality, labor union activity and leftist political causes' (McEuen: 2004 128). Following her divorce from Post's father, Nan Post worked for Margaret Sanger, the birth control advocate. McEuen notes that 'the staunch independence she displayed made a lasting impression on her adolescent daughter' (McEuen: 2004 128). Post admired her mother as 'a pioneer, traveling alone in her car around the country' (McEuen: 2004 18). Nan Post was clearly a role model for her daughter, who was also willing to travel alone for long periods while she fulfilled her role at the FSA. This was often difficult, but afforded Post a degree of freedom that was unusual for women in the 1930s.

Later experiences which influenced Post included the time she spent in Europe as a young woman in the early 1930s. She remembered when, as a student at the University of Vienna, she witnessed 'the heavy artillery bombardment of the Socialist workers' housing in Floridsdorf, whose occupants had demonstrated against encroaching Fascists' (McEuen: 2004 132). She also saw Hitler speak at a rally in Berlin, an experience which she found shocking and frightening and which strengthened her views against the rise of fascism, commenting to Paul Hendrickson that 'that experience, and what I saw when I got to Austria, made me very antifascist, as well as against all forms of racial intolerance for the rest of my life' (Hendrickson: 1992 32). Post first became involved in left-wing groups during her time in Austria, in response to these experiences. She explained that she 'attended some meetings of extreme left-wing student groups. I suppose they were Communist in nature. I think it was a perfectly legitimate idealism' (Hendrickson: 1992 34).

On return to the United States, this idealism was translated into activism, when Post and her sister Helen joined the League against War and Fascism. Among other activities, this group was involved with helping European Jews who wished to emigrate to the United States. The sisters sponsored the photographer Trude Fleischmann's move to the US. Post was glad to be able to assist the friend who had introduced her to photography in Austria, and as Hurley comments, 'often felt she should be doing more' (Hurley: 1989 14).

Post spent some time working as a freelance photographer before working as staff photographer at the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, which she later described as 'a very conservative sheet' (AG 114 box 7 Lecture Material IV). Her experiences here confirmed her need to find work which was personally meaningful. As the only female photographer on the newspaper's staff of ten, Post soon found herself supplying all the material for the newspaper's fashion and society pages. It was her frustration with this work which led her to contact Ralph Steiner, whom she had met at the Photo League, with a request for advice on how to find more satisfying employment.

Post was clearly influenced by her mother, by travelling in Europe and by her experience as a newspaper photographer. To what extent, though, do the views of radical individuals such as her mother reflect the broader culture of the 1930s? Warren I. Susman discerns a clear movement towards the political Left in 1930s culture. In *Culture as History: the Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (1985), he examines the extent to which this can be described as ideological. He analyses the growing importance of mass media and the interest in popular and folk culture, history, myth and symbol and concludes that the era was characterised less by commitment to political ideology than by the search for an 'American way of life'; a culture to provide a sense of community and meaning. Like Richard Pells, he examines the work of some key individual intellectuals and concludes that this idea of culture could, and did, have consequences which were more conservative than radical, whatever the original intentions of their authors.

Susman examines John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) in the context of contemporary literature on the marginal man who does not participate in culture and is consequently alienated from society. He suggests that Steinbeck's treatment of his theme and characters differs in important ways from that of writers such as Nelson Algren and Jack Conroy. Like them, Steinbeck is concerned with the plight of migrants, but his marginal man is not alone; he is accompanied by his family and by other travellers with whom he shares a sense of purpose and the common goal of a romantic agrarian utopia. The idea of commitment therefore fused with the concept of culture and led to participation in a group or community; something he also sees as part of the appeal of the Group Theater, with which Post was involved before she joined the FSA.

The Group Theater was active in New York in the mid-1930s. Susman's interpretation of its appeal is contradicted by later critics, who describe it as America's first theatrical collective. The co-founders of the Group included Morris Carnovsky, who along with other colleagues, was later blacklisted by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC) for his membership of the Communist Party. The Group was concerned with exploring socially relevant and political messages and many members were influenced by the Moscow Art Theatre. Hendrickson observes that 'the Group is sprinkled with leftists and Party members who are trying to create art for the masses and this fits right in with where Sis [Post] is going' (Hendrickson: 1992 37). Communist cell meetings were held there each week and leading members including Elia Kazan, Lee Strasberg and Clifford Odets were all Party members. Post was closest to Wilhemina and Tony Kraber, who would become longstanding friends and were smeared in the Communist witch-hunts of the 1950s.

While involved with the Group, Post took photographs of performances and dressing-room pictures of actors and directors. Some images were published in *Stage Magazine*, while other work was sold to members of the Group. Among other friends she made there was the playwright Clifford Odets, whose play *Waiting for Lefty*, was performed in 1935. This play was the Group's first critical and commercial success and explores Odets' preoccupation with the problem that despite the Depression, capitalist structures remained in place. Post was clearly gaining experience of photography within a radical activist context.

Like Susman, Pells aims in *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (1973) to examine the ways in which American writers and artists on the Left dealt with the Depression. He describes the 1930s as a time of social commitment and cultural experimentation, but argues that the radical ideas of the period had conservative consequences which became more pronounced later in the decade, particularly in the era of the Popular Front. He analyses the impact of the Popular Front and looks at a number of individual American intellectuals and radical groups, suggesting that many of the radical ideas of the 1930s could be used either to change or to reinforce the existing cultural and social structure and that the latter became more pronounced over time. Like Susman

(to whom this book is dedicated), he is interested in the search for community, the importance of myth and symbol, and the desire of many for a counter-culture.

Pells also discusses the Group Theater in some detail. As discussed, Post was involved with this left-wing organisation before joining the FSA and later commentators believe she was radicalised by the people she met there. Pells, however, interprets the philosophy of this and other workers' theatre groups as fundamentally apolitical. While Harold Clurman, the main force behind the Group, saw his theatre as providing a model for a collectivist life-style for the whole country, he failed to put forward a coherent social theory. The plays produced by the Group tended, like other literature at this time, to attack capitalism on moral, rather than political grounds, emphasising the dehumanising nature of work and the corrupting influence of the system.

Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front: the Laboring of American Culture* (1996) is a key revisionist text on the cultural front which argues that the Left had a significant impact on US culture in the 1930s. It was published as revisionist scholars began to reassess Post's work. The cultural milieu described by Denning, far from reinforcing conservatism as earlier scholars suggest, was evidence of a radical counter-culture. Post is mentioned only briefly in the text, but significantly this is in the context of other radical members of the FSA; she is clearly seen as a photographer with radical beliefs and an agenda to the left of New Deal liberalism. The organisations with which she had connections in the 1930s, including the Photo League and Frontier Films are examined as examples of this counter-culture and the FSA is described as one of the more radical of the New Deal agencies.

Post became involved with the Photo League after attending a talk by Ralph Steiner, who invited her to join a small group of students who met regularly at his studio to discuss their work. As discussed below, Steiner and Strand took time to help Post with her work. Hendrickson notes that both photographers had connections with the Group Theater and so for Post, 'many of these lines of learning, friendship and influence are now crisscrossing' (Hendrickson: 1992 41).

Denning defines the Cultural Front as a new radical culture of the 1930s, whose largely working-class intellectual membership came from the Young Communist League or its splinter groups. They formed literary societies, workers' theatres, camera clubs and film and photo leagues. Other members included an older generation of modernists such as John dos Passos and Archibald MacLeish, and anti-fascist emigres such as Bertolt Brecht; Weimar intellectuals who brought with them radical music and theatre. Denning contends that the Cultural Front was part of what he describes as the 'laboring of American culture' (Denning: 1996 xx). This could be seen for example in the rhetoric of the era and in the increasing participation of the working-class in this culture. It refers also to the way in which culture had by the early twentieth century become an industry of writers and artists. Most important for Denning is the fact that the phrase tells us that the culture and politics of the Popular Front were not those of New Deal liberalism, but of social democracy; Denning compares it with British labour politics. It is clearly to this new tradition that Post belongs, not that of the New Deal.

Beginning with the question of why the Left exerted such a powerful influence on the culture of the 1930s, Denning departs from earlier critics such as Pells and Susman, who saw radical artists as fellow-travellers who joined the Communist Party in the face of the threats from fascism and the destruction of the economy. He argues instead that the Cultural Front was 'the result of the encounter between a powerful democratic social movement – the Popular Front – and the modern cultural apparatuses of mass entertainment and education' (Denning: 1996 xviii). Rather than seeing the Popular Front through the 'core-periphery' model of earlier critics then, Denning believes this was a broad social movement; a historical bloc with its base in the industrial unions and its impact magnified by the rise of the 'cultural apparatus'. Its members became the leaders of the Cultural Front and

for the first time in the history of the United States, a working-class culture had made a significant impact on the dominant cultural institutions ... the Cultural Front had begun a laboring of American culture (Denning: 1996 xx).

In part two of the book, Denning examines the role of radicals in the New Deal relief programmes, including the FSA. Many young artists found work with projects such as the Federal Writers Project and the Federal Arts Project, bringing with them the aesthetics and politics of the new culture.

Denning suggests that the employment of these young radical artists had a profound impact on the agencies (the 'state apparatus'), where many of the lower-level directors were sympathetic to radical ideas, concluding that 'the federal arts projects became a crucial site where alliances were formed between the plebeian radicals and the established artists and intellectuals who dominated the non-relief personnel' (Denning: 1996 79).

The Photo League supplied photographers for some of the New Deal film and photographic projects. This growing involvement of radicals in the Roosevelt agencies may well have attracted Post to work in what Denning describes as 'one of the more radical New Deal programs' (Denning: 1996 80). Among the innovative projects established by the agency were experimental communal farms, model greenbelt communities and camps for migrant labourers. Denning describes the FSA photography project as the best known of the FSA initiatives. Significantly, he mentions Post alongside Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn and Gordon Parks, contemporaries who were not only well-known but, like her, outside the mainstream of the FSA photographic group in some way. Thus, Parks, the only black photographer in the group, shared Post's concerns with representing the experience of African Americans in the Depression and the New Deal, as did Shahn. Both Lange and Evans, like Post, were strong personalities who had their battles with Stryker over their remits and ways of working.

Post's involvement with the 'proletarian avant-garde' of the Photo League may well have radicalised her. McEuen believes that 'her participation in leftist groups that blended art, politics and culture made her as partisan a documentarian as anyone who claimed the title in the late 1930s' (McEuen: 2004 136). The Photo League supplied photographs to radical labour journals, shot newsreels of strikes and distributed films. When in 1937 Paul Strand and Ralph Steiner made *People of the Cumberland*, they asked Post to shoot the still publicity photographs for the film, described by Denning as perhaps the most successful independent Popular Front film of the period. Both Strand and Steiner had acted as mentors for Post and had observed 'her rapid development as a photographer' (McEuen: 2000 136). Hendrickson explains how 'the apprentice is invited to make the stills on a Strand-Steiner documentary film to be shot on location in Tennessee. It's an activist piece

about labor organizing' (Hendrickson: 1992 41). Filming took place at the Highlander Folk School (HFS), a focus for Popular Front culture, with its fusion of Southern vernacular culture and north-eastern avant-garde. It would play an important role in the later civil rights movement; among its alumni were Stokely Carmichael and Rosa Parks. This provided Post with her introduction to the South. She spent time with Strand, Steiner and Elia Kazan while she was there. Importantly for a young activist, she also encountered grassroots labour organisers.

Introducing a collection of essays in *The Radical Camera: New York's Photo League, 1936-1951* (2012), Mason Klein and Catherine Evans highlight the complexity and diversity of the group and its evolving ideas about the nature of the documentary image and the personal vision of the photographer. They suggest that both this emphasis on individual perspective and the group's concern with photography which 'was as much aesthetic as social-minded' defined its unique progressivism (Klein and Evans: 2012 7).

In his contribution to this collection, 'Of Poetry and Politics: the Dilemma of the Photo League', Klein observes that students at the League were encouraged to interpret the world according to their own personal vision; a psychological, political and artistic point of view which they developed by seeing themselves in relation to photography and photography in relation to society. Their work thus became distinguished by a move from bearing witness to finding one's own perspective, which Klein attributes partly to the affinity which the mainly young, Jewish, urban photographers felt with the city. Post's own way of seeing was highly personal and the degree of empathy she felt with her subjects suggests she was encouraged to create subjective images early on in her career, rather than seeking the objective style associated with documentary.

Examining the League's interpretation of social documentary, Klein makes an interesting comparison with the FSA, whose 'carefully defined archival work on the rural poor was essentially about "others", photographic subjects doubly removed from their makers by significant oversight and editing' (Mason and Klein: 2012 12). Part of the key to understanding Post's work, then, is her identification with her subjects. As I shall argue throughout this thesis, Post stood apart from her FSA colleagues. She empathised with, rather than sympathised with, her subjects, especially when they were black. This

distinction is crucial, for it aligned her with the radical photographers of the Civil Rights Movement; indeed, as I shall argue, it was a key part of the way her work presaged that of the later photographers, both that of radical black photographers and that of the radical white photographer, Danny Lyon. She clearly felt a strong affinity with African Americans. This may have reflected her recognition of parallels in the treatment of women and blacks in the 1930s. It also, as we have seen, demonstrates the strength of feeling for blacks which she developed as a child, through her mother's influence and her relationship with Reasie Hurd. This identification of photographer with subject is clear in the work of the Photo League.

Race was an important issue for the Photo League. Its treatment by League members has been criticised by Maurice Berger. Berger agrees that the League had radical roots, stating that 'the organization was born of Depression-era radical politics rooted in Communism and the Russian Revolution' (Berger: 2011 31). Berger describes how the Harlem Document emphasises the role of environment in African Americans' lives, as did the left-wing intellectuals discussed earlier. However, Berger believes that the first version of the work, exhibited in May 1939 at the New School for Social Research in New York, and published in *Look* in May 1940, is simplistic, and 'represented Harlem as joyless and dysfunctional' (Berger: 2011 32). It perpetuated stereotypes about black inferiority and 'fostered pessimism by depicting a community in inexorable decline, with little means to resolve its daunting problems' (Berger: 2011 32-33). The photographers had missed what Du Bois referred to as the 'Talented Tenth'. Not until its later publication did the document show a more complex community.

The political complexion of the Photo League has been much debated. While a consensus exists that it was a progressive organisation, critics seem unable to reach definitive conclusions about exactly how radical it was, perhaps reflecting difficulties in using the available evidence; documentary sources seem incomplete, while interviews with surviving members reflect the group's diversity and have become increasingly unreliable over time. The secondary literature is therefore of limited use in assessing the League's political influence on Post. If additional sources can be identified, this may be an area for further investigation. The main Photo League scholars with an interest in this area include Lilian Bezner, Fiona M Dejardin, Leah Ollmann and Anne Wilkes

Tucker, all of whom conducted research in the 1990s, and John Raeburn (2006). Tucker also contributed an essay to *The Radical Camera* (2012).

Mason Klein comments that the organisation evolved from the Film and Photo League, part of the Workers' International Relief (WIR) and that 'during its first handful of years, what clearly prevailed were the radical political ideals that had defined the original group' (Klein: 2011 11). After photographers in the group broke away from the filmmakers in 1936, the new Photo League continued to be 'informed by a socialist sensibility and advocacy' although Klein notes that it did not seek to impose a prescriptive ideology on its students (Klein: 2011 13). Klein does emphasise, however, that 'much of the documentary photography of the Photo League's first five years was put to signature progressive use' (Klein: 2011 11). This is a clear and important indication that whatever its later position, the organisation had retained its radical activist ethos at the time that Post, who was becoming increasingly politically aware and keen to use her photographic skills in a meaningful way, became a member. As Klein interprets it, the League became an increasingly complex organisation in its later years. It is only recently that information about its demise has come to light, through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Klein concludes that it is this delay that has led to the League's 'status as a monolithic "political" organization, narrowly defined by the documentary style and far-left associations of its beginnings', largely continuing to the present (Klein: 2011 15).

Similarly, Jacqueline Ellis believes that the League became progressively less left-wing as it moved away from 'overt representations of archetypal proletarian ideas' (Ellis: 1998 64). Ellis argues that

without a fundamental focus on working-class identity, political radicalism, at the Group Theater performances and in photographs at the League, was little more than a rhetorical or a visual façade. As a result, 'left-wing activist' was an ideological position easily taken on in the artistic community to which Post Wolcott belonged (Ellis: 1998 65)

This claim lacks credibility. Denning's more convincing revisionist interpretation suggests that the Photo League was part of a radical political cultural front, as discussed above.

Dejardin (1994) uses members' activities and the types of publications which published their photographs to make a case for the organisation being very left-wing. She concludes that it is difficult to believe members were unaware of the radical nature of most of these publications, but

acknowledges that this does not amount to evidence that the League was a subversive organisation. Like other commentators, she highlights the diverse political background of the membership, which included liberals, humanists and social reformers as well as Marxists.

It is difficult to make generalisations about an organisation's ideology when it has not openly declared a political affiliation and is artistic in nature, as John Raeburn (2006) points out. Raeburn suggests that Dejardin's research at best provides evidence that some League members, such as Sid Grossman, were fellow-travellers. He also comments that determining the organisation's political stance is made more difficult by the blurring of distinctions between radicals and liberals which occurred during the era of the Popular Front in the 1930s. He concludes 'that most – or probably even all – Photo League members considered themselves "progressive"' seems beyond question, but whether they were mostly New Deal liberals or radicals is not so obvious' (Raeburn: 2006 244). Indeed, it might even be argued that while the splinter group which became Frontier Films was politically engaged, the Photo League was less strident, its ultimate concern being with broad humanist values. It is perhaps significant that Tucker, writing originally in 1994, was by the time she wrote her essay 'A Rashomon Reading', her contribution to the collection of essays in *Radical Camera: New York's Photo League* in 2012, still only able to state that the documentary evidence was inconclusive. Ultimately, the issue is perhaps best summed up by Bezner (1999), who discusses the radical nature of the group's history and its strong roots in the radical politics of the Depression, but concludes that the evidence which does exist proves only its humanist, documentary emphasis.

The HFS had radical roots. It was established to combat local poverty and to raise class consciousness through the renewal of folk culture and the training of radical labour leaders. Denning (1996) describes it as 'central' to Popular Front culture; a crucial establishment for young Southern labour organisers from local mill and sharecropper families. Its arts programmes represented a fusion of Southern vernacular culture and the avant-garde workers' theatre (such as the Group Theater) of the north east. Denning believes it laid the ground for the civil rights movement; as already mentioned, Stokely Carmichael and Rosa Parks were students. Again, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about ideology. Russell Campbell (1982) believes that,

while clearly progressive, the school's lack of formal ties with any political party enabled it to retain political independence

Both Russell Campbell in *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States 1930-1942* (1982) and William Alexander in *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942* (1981) present detailed analyses of the structure of *People of the Cumberland*. Alexander makes an explicit link with the dialectical form of Soviet films. Campbell finds little objective evidence either to support or refute accusations that Frontier Films was under Communist Party sway. However, by 1936, the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) was part of the Popular Front. It had abandoned its opposition to Roosevelt and supported his work with the unions; it also became increasingly patriotic and populist. Campbell's analysis of various elements in the film suggests that it lay within the boundaries of the People's Front political analysis and tactical line adopted by the CPUSA in the late 1930s, which included commitment to short-term trades union goals; the promotion of 'Americanism' and alignment with sections of the working-class against fascism. Campbell also explains that the workers in the film are shown organising not against the state, as represented by FDR and the New Deal, but against one specific right-wing organisation. He concludes that while the film failed to give the New Deal unqualified endorsement, neither did it acknowledge the risks of either capitalist investment or socialist planning, which situated it, within the ideology of the People's Front. It seems clear then that the film reflects the ideology of the Popular Front, rather than the Communist Party.

In her 2012 essay, 'As good as the guys: the women of the Photo League', Catherine Evans comments on the large number of women in the group and examines their contribution to its output. While Post's membership of the League and its formative influence on her is mentioned elsewhere in the literature, Evans does not discuss her, nor is she included in the list of female members quoted here. As Evans makes several points which are relevant to Post, this omission suggests an area for further research. Evans believes that female members of the group merit our attention for their 'intense engagement' with photography and their ability to 'merge incisive content with aesthetic sensibilities' both of which contributed to the League's success (Evans: 2012 46). As we have seen, her use of formal concerns as a means of conveying

content is key to understanding Post's work. Her interest in modernism may have begun here.

Alexander Leicht examines the relationship between structural features of art and aspects of democracy, suggesting that formalism may fuse form and content into 'embodied meanings' (Leicht: 2012 14). He identifies three formal elements which correspond with elements of democracy: egalitarianism, pluralism and openness. I suggest that Post explored 'conceptual questions of democracy through structure' (Leicht: 2012 24).

Leicht identifies 'aesthetic egalitarianism' in 'art which denies that there is an inherent hierarchy with regard to what is worthy of being made the subject matter of art' (Leicht: 2012 27). Every individual is entitled to be a 'full citizen of the demos', deserving equal respect and equal right to justice and basic liberties (Leicht: 2012 30). The artist represents this through respectful portraiture, characterised by a non-hierarchical approach to subject matter, respect for the subject and an emphasis on representing individuality. Leicht notes the direct, eye-level approach that Walker Evans adopted in his work. Post also employed this strategy, conveying her belief in her subjects' status as equals and inviting her viewers' empathy. Both photographers created beautiful images, but Leitch emphasises that 'the beauty of the pictures rather underlines the dignity of the persons portrayed'; declaring the subjects worthy of representation' (Leicht: 2012 133). Both also portrayed objects and buildings respectfully. Post accorded black housing in Washington, DC equal respect as the white government buildings that literally and metaphorically overshadowed them.

Pluralism is encouraged in democracies; autonomous individuals nevertheless represent coherence, order and harmony. In Post's Belzoni image, her everyman represents a group within a repressive society. The flat plane in Post's work suggests the democratic ideal of pluralism. Ideally, individuals who are all respected equally interact with each other and with their surroundings, preventing their isolation. The lone figure in this image suggests the chasm between this democratic ideal and social reality.

The third formal element is openness, including belief in the capacity for self-government. While artists are aware of the gap between these ideals and

social reality, there is 'simultaneous hope and conviction that this difference can progressively be made smaller' (Leicht: 2012 53). However, I argue that Post sought fundamental change. Leicht believes that art explores democracy, not just through explicit themes, but through formal features; structural patterns and aesthetic strategies which share these features with concepts of democracy, reflecting the artist's concern with 'an egalitarian ennoblement of the ordinary', which I argue is also Post's concern, here and throughout her work (Leicht: 2012 235).

Leicht is particularly interesting on realism and modernism, suggesting that a combination of these two forms is helpful, since

the realist sensibility, or a certain belief in reference and representation, is needed in order to find proper analogies or metaphors for respect, individuality, particularity. The modernist sensibility, or a heightened awareness of form and structure, is needed in order to explore matters of coherence' (Leicht: 2012: 151).

Artists use realism to represent specificity and individuality and form to emphasise underlying structures. Post used both, simultaneously conveying her empathy with suffering individuals and her awareness of segregation. In a democracy, this image would reflect the dualism of individual and structure; in the segregated South, it represents the tension between them.

Evans also comments on the opportunities photography offered to women, who held key positions in the group at a time when most professions remained closed to them. She observes that women were drawn to the League by its inclusiveness and congenial atmosphere. Photography may have been attractive to women because it was a new medium and not yet weighed down by tradition (although, as noted earlier, Post's own experience working in newspapers shows it was not completely supportive). The group's focus was on 'insightful, empathic realism and its politics were reformist' (Evans: 2012 48). It attracted women who were politically aware and sought active engagement with contemporary issues. Children and African Americans were frequent subjects. Evans concludes by observing that those women who joined the League in its early years were likely to be motivated by politics and ideology, while those who became involved later were responding to feelings of empathy and ideas about social justice. It is probable that Post was motivated by all of these.

Stein examines the importance of women's photography during the intervals between the three 'waves' of feminism, finding signs of 'consolidation, reaction, or incubation' within them (Stein: 2010 193). I suggest that Post's images represent her 'reaction' to earlier representations of blacks. According to Stein,

although none of the inter-war photographers whose work was collected by MoMA was African American, a surprising number of the white women made a heightened consciousness of race integral to their photographic pursuits (Stein: 2010 204).

Stein discusses the concept of 'double consciousness'; the 'sense of self' and the 'sense of self-as-other' proposed by W E B du Bois to explain black internalisation of oppression. I suggest that Post was motivated by her empathy with blacks' 'sense of self-as-other'. Stein says,

arguably owing to their own experience of gender inequality, women were predisposed to identify with another group subject to deep-seated prejudice; possibly also in reaction to the previous generation of politically active women in the suffrage movement - a struggle dominated by white women, and one that sometimes promoted the cause of disenfranchised white women at the expense of advancing racial justice - this next generation of women was predisposed to subordinate the unfinished fight for gender equality to the dramatic disparities still maintained by white supremacy (Stein: 2010 204).

Some commentators, notably Pells and Susman, have clearly identified a political move towards the left in the 1930s which they believe led paradoxically to greater conservatism in society. Dissatisfaction led to a search for the inherently conservative ideals of family and community. Thus, radical ideas had the effect of reinforcing existing social structures. However, Denning argues more convincingly for the existence of a politically radical counter-culture he calls the Cultural Front. Members of the Cultural Front were predominantly working-class intellectuals with links to the Young Communist League. They began to be involved with creating culture as well as experiencing it. Post's formative years were thus spent in a radical political and cultural milieu. She was involved with the League against War and Fascism, the Group Theater, the Photo League and Frontier Films. All were radical

organisations. The ongoing debate over just how radical reflects the continuing questions about the nature of Post's own political position.

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Post clearly stood out from her mainly male, white, liberal colleagues in the FSA. Important influences on her included her family background, especially her mother. As a young woman, Post witnessed the rise of Nazism during her travels in Europe in the 1930s. On her return, she joined the League against War and Fascism. As part of what Denning describes as the Cultural Front, Post was involved with the Group Theater, the Photo League and Frontier Films. All were radical organisations. She worked as one of only a few female newspaper photographers. These life experiences all contributed to the development of an independent-minded young photographer who was determined to express her ideas about racial and social equality. Her desire for her photographs to effect radical social change marked her out further: as an activist among documentarians.

There are many theoretical traditions which might be used to attempt to understand Post's work. The work of semioticians, Marxist-feminists, critical race theorists and intersectionality scholars appear to be most useful. It will be particularly important to explore the concept of the gaze of the white female photographer.

CHAPTER TWO

SACRED IMAGES FOR A SECULAR SOCIETY: SOUTHERN ICONS IN BLACK AND WHITE

What is an iconic photograph? In *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture and Liberal Democracy* (2007), Hariman and Lucaites liken the images under discussion to religious icons, working on different levels of ritual and response. These include easy recognition and veneration by people of different backgrounds, wide reproduction in the public sphere, their use in orienting individuals within a context of collective identity, obligation and power and their ability to represent large swathes of historical experience. They are not documentary records, but 'sacred images for a secular society', which enable individuals to identify personally with large-scale historical events (Hariman and Lucaites: 2007 2). Such images may represent relationships of power, via the objectification of the 'other' by the gaze of authority. It is also possible that they reflect other forms of social, political and artistic consciousness; they may be seen as works of art that reflect democracy. They thus do more than reproduce a structure of power; they produce the idealism and resistance to authority which form the basis of democracy, providing 'an accessible and centrally positioned set of images for exploring how political action (or inaction) can be constituted through visual media' (Hariman and Lucaites: 2007 5).

Such images may be highly specific, but the viewer does not always have details such as dates, locations or names of subjects. Far from detracting from the viewer's experience, this enhances the image's emblematic value, elevating it above the level of documentary record to that of symbol. Hariman and Lucaites suggest several further areas of influence for iconic photographs: reproducing ideology; communicating social knowledge; shaping collective memory; modelling citizenship and providing figural resources for communicative action. The last of these is of particular relevance when we consider Marion Post's *Negro Man Entering a Movie Theatre by 'colored' Entrance, Belzoni, Mississippi, October 1939* (Figure 1), which I suggest is an iconic image. It is a well-composed, highly symbolic black-and-white rendering of the American South's segregated black and white worlds.

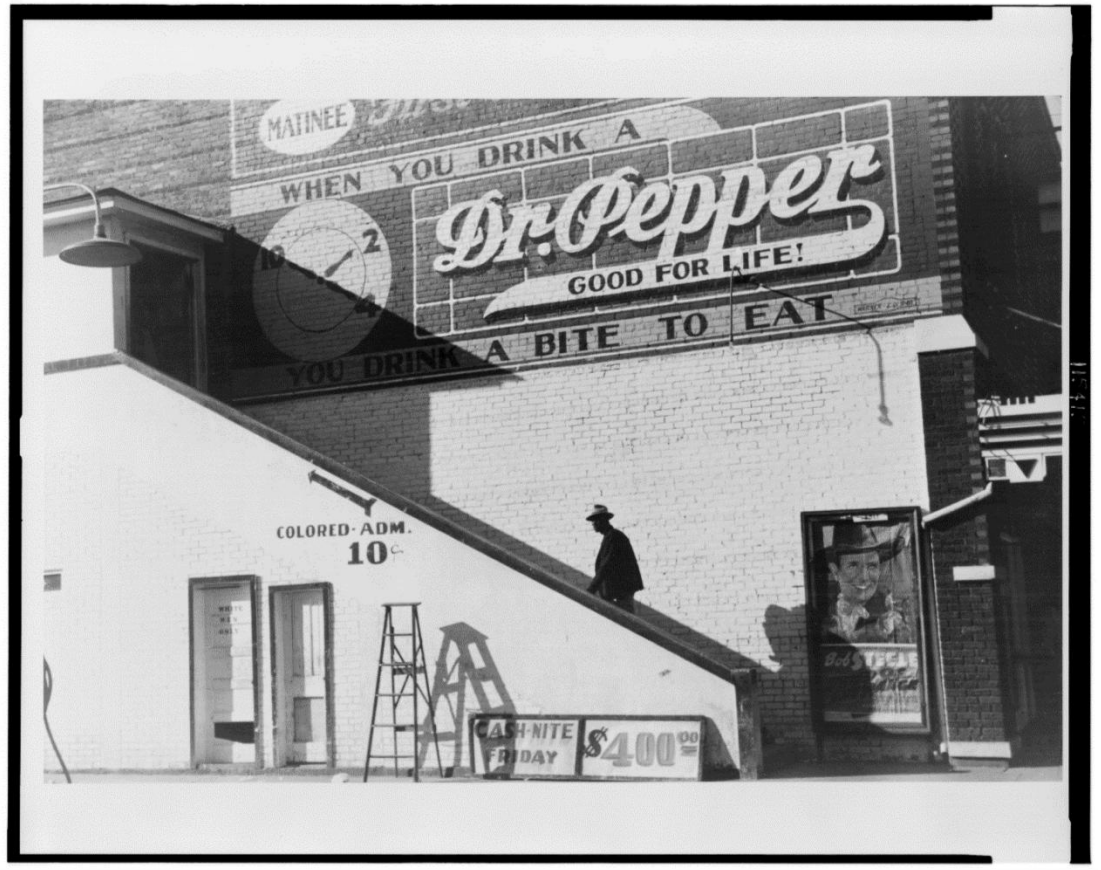


Figure 1. Marion Post. *Negro Man Entering a Movie Theater by 'colored' Entrance, Belzoni, Mississippi. October 1939.*

It is helpful first to briefly consider three famous examples: *Death of a Loyalist Militiaman* (1936), *'Old Glory' Goes up on Mount Suribachi* (1945) and *Destitute Pea Pickers in California* (1936). The captions for these images by Robert Capa, Joe Rosenthal and Dorothea Lange respectively, include places and dates. While this information helps situate the images in geographical and historical context, however, the symbolism in these images is so strong that such detail at times seems irrelevant. The photographs explore ostensibly universal themes which require little further explanation. It is notable that the figures in all three of these images are unnamed: the falling soldier is a 'loyalist militiaman'; 'Old Glory' is raised by several soldiers who are not referred to in the caption; Lange's migrant mother is simply one of many displaced by the Depression. In the first two photographs, the subjects' faces are not visible and in the third the woman does not face the camera directly. Such anonymity reinforces the photographs'

symbolic value, for the individuals come to represent the themes explored by the photographers.



Figure 2. Robert Capa. *Death of a Loyalist Militiaman. Spain. Cordoba Front. September 1936.* ('Death of a Loyalist Soldier').



Figure 3. Joe Rosenthal. *'Old Glory' Goes up on Mount Suribachi. 23 February 1945.* ('Flag-raising at Iwo Jima').

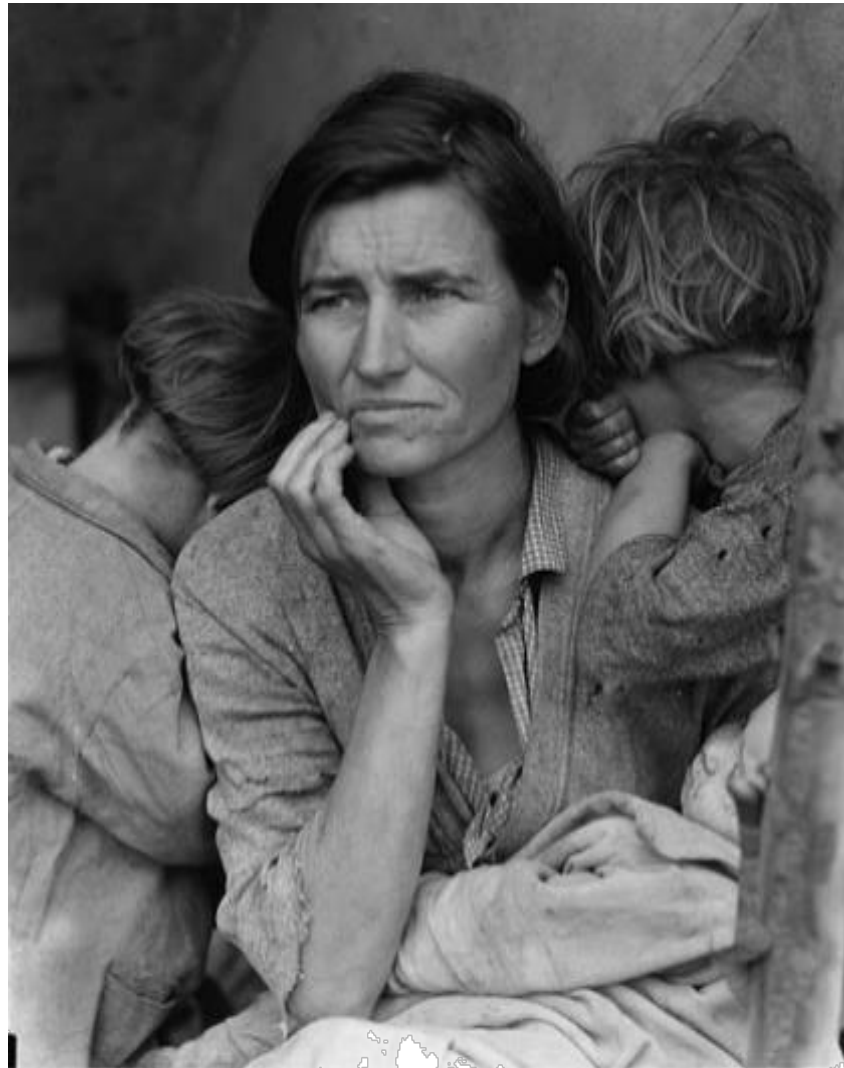


Figure 4. Dorothea Lange. *Destitute Pea Pickers in California. Mother of Seven Children. Aged 32. Nipomo, California. 1936.* ('Migrant Mother').

This anonymity is emphasised in Marion Post's 'Negro man' climbing the staircase in Belzoni; an 'everyman', who is one of many African Americans in one of many segregated Southern towns. Danny Lyon's photograph, *Segregated Drinking Fountains in the County Courthouse in Albany, Georgia, August 1962* (Figure 5), goes further. This image is devoid of any human presence and focuses on the symbolism of segregation signage.

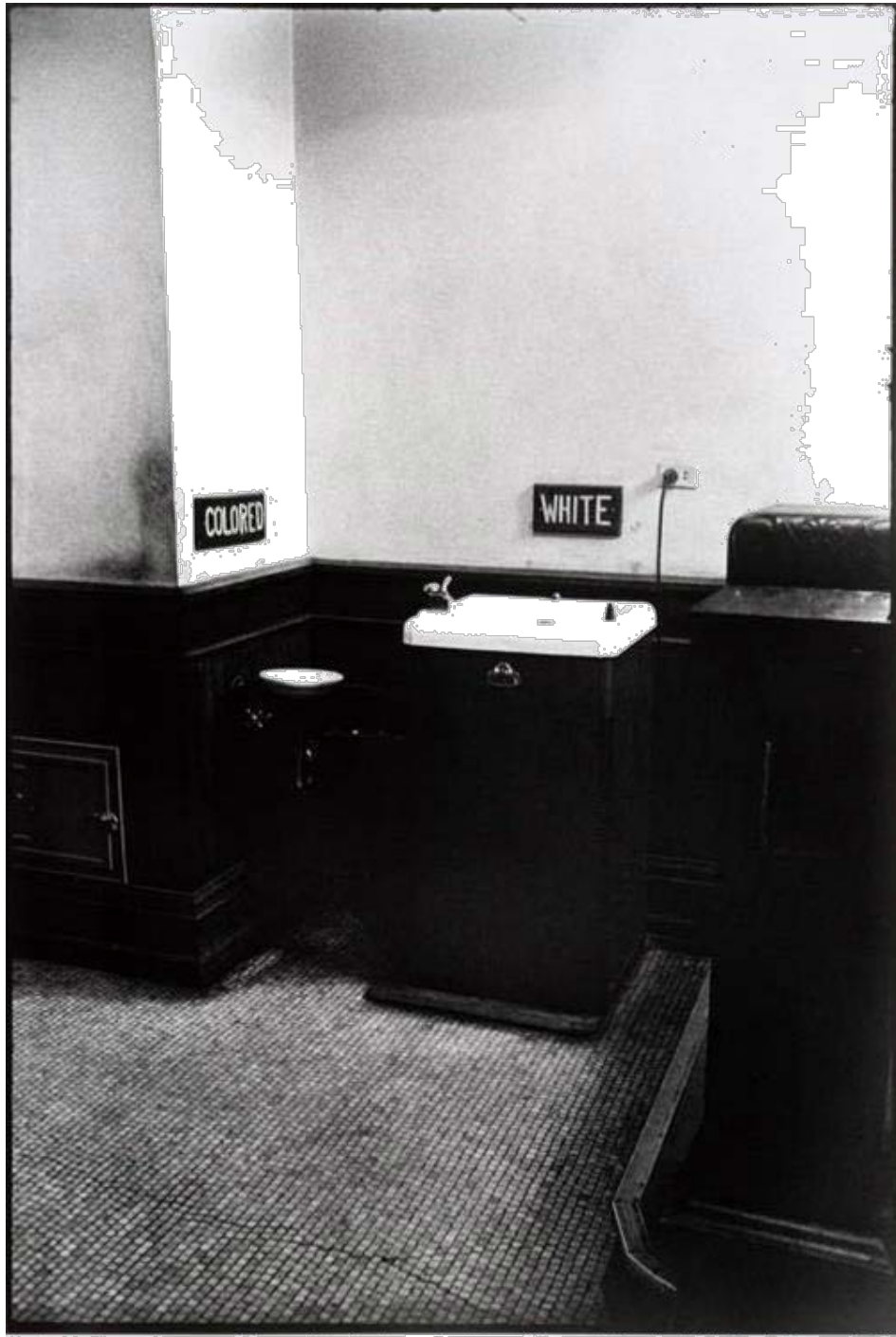


Figure 5. Danny Lyon. *Segregated Drinking Fountains in the County Courthouse in Albany, Georgia*. August 1962.

This symbolism, characteristic of the iconic photograph, combines with the aesthetic and formal concerns of the photographer to evoke strong emotion in the viewer. These are not, then, intended to be objective images, but to convey the photographer's message; about the nature of conflict, of victory and of poverty in the Depression. It is in this context that Post's photograph should be read, for it is more than a documentary record of historical fact. Post's anger at

the effects of segregation and by extension her desire for the system to be dismantled are explicit in the image, as are Lyon's equally strong feelings in his later image.

The emergence over time of popular titles, reflecting wide recognition, is linked with their wide circulation at the time they were created and, certainly with Lange's and Rosenthal's images, with their adaptation for later and different use. As early as 1939, *Migrant Mother* had been appropriated for use in the Spanish civil war lithograph, *Spanish Mother, the Terror of 1938*. It was used in 1964 by the Latin American magazine, *Bohemia Venezolana* and in 1973 by the Black Panthers in their newspaper. Finally, in 1983, it helped raise funds for Florence Thompson, the unnamed subject of the photograph, who was by this time elderly and ill. *Flag-raising at Iwo Jima* underwent similar reincarnations, for even more diverse purposes, including to promote the seventh war loan drive in 1945, as a peace poster during the Vietnam War and to advertise McDonald's in 1984.

Significantly, all three earlier images became controversial because they may have been posed. Post's photograph has not been discussed in this context. The lone figure who is the subject of the image certainly appears to have been captured at a very fortuitous moment, however, resulting in a perfectly balanced composition in which no other figures distract the viewer from the emblematic black man ascending the staircase against a symbolic and highly ironic background of signs. Post makes use of irony or disjunction in many of her images. This produces shock in the viewer. I suggest that this formal technique is an example of the 'aesthetic metaphor' discussed in Chapter One.

These are all questions which we can ask about Post's image, one of a series of photographs exploring black and white cultures in Belzoni, Mississippi. I suggest this is an important example of an iconic image, because of the issues it addresses, its aesthetic qualities and the way in which it demonstrates the many qualities which make Post stand out as a photographer pushing at the limits of photographic representations of segregation. I will argue that this image should be interpreted as an activist photograph and that Post should be considered an activist photographer. In this image of segregation in a Southern town, Post explores an issue of social injustice which was fundamental, seemingly universal and timeless. It was, however, an issue with

which many photographers and other commentators failed to engage because of its controversial nature. Indeed, FSA photographers including Post were discouraged from seeking out situations which revealed the effect of segregation on African Americans. In a similar way to the iconic images of Capa, Rosenthal and Lange, then, Post's photograph addresses the universal theme of suffering through the specificities of a particular historical issue. In a similar way to the iconic images of Capa, Rosenthal and Lange, then, Post's photograph addresses the universal theme of suffering through the specificities of a particular historical issue. In this image, the issue is one of racial injustice. The solitary man walking up the stairs to the entrance to the segregated movie theater represents the injustice of segregation in a small town in Mississippi in the 1930s. He is also Everyman.

As with these other images, the strong emotional force of this photograph is enhanced by its aesthetic qualities: its careful composition, use of light and shade and the ironic juxtaposition of the solitary black figure at the centre of the image with signifiers of the American Dream, such as the Dr Pepper advertisement, which is directly above the man and proclaims that it is 'Good for life!'. Vicki Goldberg describes the 'disturbing touch of aesthetic grace, which lends such images an oddly inappropriate beauty' (Goldberg: 1991 148). As discussed in chapter one, Post made use of what Leicht calls 'aesthetic metaphors' for democracy. Beauty, here as elsewhere in her work, therefore enabled Post to explore issues of democracy and justice. Post's image expresses her concerns with racial and class inequality, demonstrating an empathy with African Americans which some commentators may find unusual in a white photographer and which challenges the view that African Americans can only be empathetically represented by black photographers.

Post's need to express her concern demonstrates the independence of mind which drove her to pursue an interest outside her official remit. This image also reflects Post's aesthetic concerns and the way she used these to strengthen her message; her careful timing and composition, resulting in a photograph of an anonymous black man ascending the staircase, a sympathetic figure, behind whom lurk ambiguous shadows, suggesting subjection or, possibly, threat. Post's independence, her strong,

unapologetically emotional message and the formal qualities in her image presage the work of Lyon. Lyon's predecessor by almost a generation, she had more in common with the activist civil rights photographer than with many of her FSA contemporaries working to promote the liberal philosophy of Roosevelt's New Deal.

What evidence is there to support a claim for this as an iconic image? I will contextualise this photograph and analyse it alongside Lyon's iconic image, *Segregated Drinking Fountains in the County Courthouse in Albany, Georgia, August 1962* (Figure 5). First, I will examine these images in the context of the organisations which employed the photographers and the men who directed their work. By 1939, Post had worked for over a year with the FSA. Her photographic assignments were directed by Stryker, head of the Historical Section, who reflected the mainly liberal ethos of this largely white New Deal organisation. In 1962, University of Chicago student Lyon was introduced to the civil rights movement by the radical, mainly black, SNCC. This image was one of his first for SNCC, where after graduating he would work under the direction of the increasingly radical James Forman. It is also important to consider the personalities of the photographers and the impact of biographical and photographic influences on them. While their organisations were markedly different in aims and political ethos, the issues that were of personal concern to them were very similar and defined their work. I believe that close analysis of their photographs in this context will reveal two iconic images which reflect the personal concerns of two remarkable young photographers. They were separated by a generation, but both were driven by their passion for social justice and racial equality.

WHITE LIBERAL DOCUMENTARIANS AND BLACK RADICAL ACTIVISTS

Post and Lyon were both employed as photographers to provide publicity for their organisations' work. The groups were very different in their origins, organisation, composition and aims. I suggest that Post's activism made her stand apart from most of her FSA colleagues. The Historical Section of the FSA was headed by Stryker (Figure 6). It was closely identified with the liberal ideology of President Roosevelt and its perceived role was reinforcing New Deal policies. Post's colleagues were mainly white, male, liberal professional photographers whose role was to document social decline and

resilience during the Depression and to promote the New Deal policies which aimed to ameliorate the effects of the economic downturn. Post joined the organisation in 1938.

Stryker told Gordon Parks, the FSA's first African American photographer, that he was 'going to get us all fired' when he produced *American Gothic 1942*, his iconic photograph of black government cleaner Ella Watson (Roth: 2013 introduction). The photograph was later described as Parks' 'signature image'. Stryker was not unsympathetic to African Americans and indeed warned Parks on his appointment that he would find life difficult, both in Washington, DC and within the FSA. He was highly aware of the sensitivities surrounding the issue of race, however and keen to avoid any controversy. He did not encourage his staff to seek out images such as this. Like most of those involved in the New Deal, Stryker was politically liberal and optimistically working towards the alleviation of poverty; he was not however trying to use FSA images to promote a radical restructuring of society. He was described by photographer Aaron Siskind as 'a supreme pragmatist' and was politically savvy (AG30, box 29, interviews). His aim as photographic director of the FSA Historical Section was to record life as it was experienced during the Depression and to publicise the work being carried out by the New Deal to remedy it.



Figure 6. *Untitled* [Roy Stryker]. 1935-1944.

Stryker was overly concerned with the personal lives of his staff. This was particularly true of the way he tried to impose double standards on Post's dress and behaviour, telling her at one point that 'slacks aren't part of your attire when you are in the back country. You are a woman and "a woman can't never be a man"' (Hurley: 1989 37). For her part, Post responded with spirit and humour to his advice, addressing one letter to him, 'Now Grandfather' (Hurley:1989 38), but was all too aware that her male colleagues were not subject to the same constraints. In an interview with Pat Mitchell in 1989, Post remembered Stryker's 'very paternalistic attitude', which she 'found very annoying and I wanted to be treated as an adult for once and equal to the other photographers' (AG114, box 6, file 6). Post was treated as less than equal to her male counterparts in other ways, too. In her essay 'Marion Post Wolcott's letters and photographs from the Great Depression', Julia Driskell refers to

Post's salary being only two-thirds that of the male photographers in the FSA (AG114, box 4, file 9).

Furthermore, Post was obliged to travel long distances alone. Most of Post's male colleagues were married and were accompanied on their assignments by their wives. Unmarried male members of the group, meanwhile, were free to take companions with them. Travelling alone was often difficult for Post, but Sally Stein has noted 'her ability to function as a single woman in a variety of challenging circumstances' (AG114, box 3, file 5). Post commented later on Russell Lee's travel arrangements that she

always felt envious of the photographers who had wives (or in the case of Lange, husbands) to do their captions, or who traveled with their so-called secretaries as Russell did. I nearly died when I found out about that years later. And I had to be so *careful* not to meet anybody or see anybody. It was so unfair. If I had tried anything like that Roy would have *killed* me! I'd never had gotten away with it because everyone was so curious about a woman (Hurley: 1989 57).

At 46, Stryker was some 17 years older than Post when she arrived at the FSA, but gender and his conservative views were probably more significant than this age difference. Nevertheless, Stryker's relationship with Post was perhaps more complex than this suggests. As explained in chapter three, Post's mother had been dismissed from her job with the American Birth Control League because of her efforts to unionise her colleagues. Post's close relationship with her mother is reflected in an emotional letter she wrote to Stryker, describing how she 'got so MAD & couldn't think much else, for a short while. My insides just BOILED: That dirty bunch of stinkers – no notice – ONE month's pay, after all that time' (AG 114, box 8, file Post/Stryker letters I). Replying to Post in February 1939, Stryker asks her to 'Let me know as soon as possible about anything that you would need my assistance on regarding your mother. I will be glad to talk to anyone around town who might be able to help get her lined up' (AG 114, box 8, file Post/Stryker letters II).

Post was restricted too in the issues she could explore with Stryker's blessing. While she wanted to pursue topics which were of personal interest to her, Stryker emphasised his requirement for photographs of positive examples of rural rehabilitation projects. Indeed, she was even more constrained than her male colleagues in this respect. Perhaps because of her experience as a

newspaper photographer, Post was also often called upon to carry out work for other government offices. It is easy to understand why Stryker should wish her to undertake this work. Post's interest in people on the margins of society, such as African Americans, did not neatly coincide with the liberal optimism of the New Deal. Significantly, many of her images were not published at the time. These photographs are important, because they highlight aspects of life in the 1930s which were not addressed either by the New Deal or by the FSA. Sylvie Roder, reviewing an exhibition of Post's work noted that

perhaps more than her FSA contemporaries, she pinpoints the cruel ironies of race relations in the South. For all its humanitarian impulses, the New Deal had its blind spots. Civil rights were not part of the 'deal'. But Wolcott saw all sorts of undercurrents in American society that did not surface until a good twenty years later' (AG114, box 9, file Reviews IV).

The failure of both the New Deal and the FSA to address such issues represented both a lost opportunity and a moral problem.

Two decades after Marion Post first pushed the FSA to circulate more candid depictions of African American life, Danny Lyon joined SNCC. Two years previously, SNCC had broken away from its parent organisation, Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The SNCC slogan, 'Come let us build a new world together', appeared on their posters, illustrated by one of Lyon's early photographs, showing John Lewis and other SNCC members kneeling and praying outside a segregated swimming pool. A black activist civil rights movement consisting of radical, mainly male, Southern students, SNCC reflected the emphasis in the civil rights movement on the strong, black male leader. It was 'unorthodox and uncompromising, a cadre of mostly black, mostly Southern students willing to challenge white Southern repression in its most entrenched forms and its most dangerous locations' (Raiford: 2011 67). It was 'distinctly radical and radically distinct' and became more so over time, as did Forman (Figure 7), who directed Lyon during his time with the organisation (Raiford: 2011 94). A self-described band of brothers and circle of trust, the group thought of themselves 'with youthful élan, as the "True Believers", absolutely dedicated to placing their bodies on the line in the struggle to outlaw Jim Crow' (Albert and Hoffman: 1990 253).



Figure 7. Danny Lyon. *James Forman*. 1963.

In the 1960s, Forman's 'fiercely revolutionary vision' gained him the respect of many in the civil rights movement (Martin: 2005 A18). His style was more radical than the faith-based approach espoused by King. Forman was critical of King, feeling that 'much harm could be done by interjecting the Messiah complex' and he questioned King's style of top-down leadership, which he felt undermined efforts to develop grassroots activity at the local community level (Holley: 2005 A1621).

Forman later described how he became increasingly radicalised during his time with SNCC, saying that 'accumulating experiences with Southern "law and order" were turning me into a fully-fledged revolutionary' (Holley: 2005 A1621). His move to the left failed, however, to protect him from being ousted from the organisation in the late 1960s in favour of Stokely Carmichael. Forman could thus hardly have been ideologically further removed from Stryker. Writing in the late 1970s, he called for autonomy for what he described as a 'nation' of African Americans living as an oppressed people in the United States and criticised King for working with the state to secure limited gains for African Americans (Forman: 1980 ix). In his speech 'Black Liberation' delivered at the Western Regional Youth Conference in Los Angeles in November 1967, Forman described the black community as being in a colonial relationship with

the mainstream white community, in which 'our own colonial status is unique in that we are the descendants of people enslaved and transplanted into a colonial status' (Forman: 1967 2). In *1967: High Tide of Black Resistance*, Forman wrote that liberation from this 'colonial relationship' would occur only through the destruction of the capitalist imperialist system in the United States and elsewhere, explaining that 'to work, to fight, and to die for the liberation of our people in the United States means, therefore, to work for the liberation of all oppressed people around the world' (Forman: 1967 1). Forman was increasingly conscious of the international dimension of the African American struggle, calling for a 'developing black consciousness and a spirit of internationalism' (Forman: 1967 1). He was particularly aware of the impact of independence movements in colonies overseas on the African American community in the United States. He believed that black communities in the United States were explosive enclaves that must at all costs resist being integrated into mainstream American society, as this would represent an accommodation with the white community's aim of pacifying and thereby containing them. Thus, African Americans must say to the white community 'you can only kill us, but we shall die fighting for our freedom' (Forman: 1967 2).

Forman wielded 'masterly organizational skills' (Martin: 2005 18). Executive secretary of SNCC from 1961-1966, he was described by Julian Bond as 'the personality and the glue that held us all together ... [He was] extremely forceful without shouting and screaming' (Martin: 2005 18). His main task was to unify a group of young, idealistic, radical students, a task he accomplished by performing 'an organizational miracle', taking on the numerous mundane administrative chores necessary for the efficient functioning of the organisation (Holley: 2005 A1621). Forman was also a publicist for SNCC. As executive secretary of a radical group of young activists seeking fundamental change in society, his role was clearly quite distinct from that held by Stryker, who was creating a documentary record of society and who sought limited reforms within existing social structures. Forman had worked as journalist before joining SNCC and had acquired a sophisticated understanding of the media. He was fully aware of how important it was for SNCC not to allow the mainstream media to control the image which was disseminated to the public, but rather to develop and present its own image.

It was to fulfil this need that Lyon was appointed as SNCC's first staff photographer.

Like Post, Lyon experienced problems in his relationship with his photographic director. At 34, Forman was 14 years his senior. Again, this age difference seems less significant than other aspects of the director's personality. Their relationships with their photographers were perhaps the only commonality the two photographic directors shared. Unlike Post, Lyon was fortunate that he saw many of his images being put to practical use, with good effect. These include his photographs of the Leesburg Stockade girls in Georgia, which were directly responsible for the release of the imprisoned teenage girls. He said later that his photographs 'had actually accomplished something. They had gotten people out of jail' (Lyon: 2010 80). Another image, one of Lewis and others praying in front of a segregated swimming pool became the SNCC logo and appeared on their posters, as mentioned earlier. Yet, like Stryker, Forman tried to impose his will on his young protégé. Ultimately, Lyon rebelled, explaining that 'if I wanted anything in life, it was to be free and I intended to create myself' (Lyon: 2009 Preface). Lyon helped create SNCC's public image, but left in search of the freedom to pursue topics he found personally and artistically meaningful.

This desire for the freedom to pursue subjects which were personally fulfilling clearly united Post and Lyon. Post was an activist photographer who sought change through images such as the Belzoni photograph, which may be interpreted as an activist photograph. As we have seen, her ambitions were frustrated by the nature of the organisation for which she worked and, in particular, by Stryker.

THE AUTHOR OF THE IMAGE

I believe that the personal qualities and motivations of Post and Lyon (Figures 8 and 9) are intrinsic to an understanding of their work. As Ralph Steiner, Photo League colleague and longstanding friend of Post said, 'behind every sincere photographer is a person with a head and a heart' (AG114, box 7, file I). I will therefore examine the biographical and photographic influences

working on Post and Lyon and demonstrate that Post had more in common with the later photographer than with her FSA colleagues. It is useful to compare the later photographer with Post, for the striking similarities between the aesthetic qualities of their work reflect their shared commitment to using formalism as a means of exploring issues of democracy. Post's interest in both realism and modernism, her use of what Leicht refers to as 'aesthetic metaphors' was shared by Lyon (Leicht: 2012 19). Thus, Post's beautiful image of the solitary figure climbing the stairs to the entrance of the segregated movie house leaves the viewer in no doubt that she believes this man is worthy of representation. Lyon's image contains no human figures, but its careful composition renders it beautiful and informs us that he regarded the people who use these segregated facilities as worthy of representation.

August 3, 1940

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

The bearer of this letter, Miss Marion Post, whose photograph and notarized signature appear below, is an official photographer for the United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, and is on official assignment for the Farm Security Administration and other Bureaus of the Federal Government.

[Handwritten signature]

ADMINISTRATOR



Marion Post

PRINCIPAL PHOTOGRAPHER
HISTORICAL SECTION
DIVISION OF INFORMATION

This is to certify that Marion Post personally appeared before me and the attached photograph and signature are authentic.
Clare D. Whitehead, Notary Public, Fair
Commission Expires March 28, 1943

Figure 8. *Untitled* [Marion Post, Principal Photographer, Historical Section, Information Division, Notarized Photograph Attached to Letter of Introduction]. 1940.

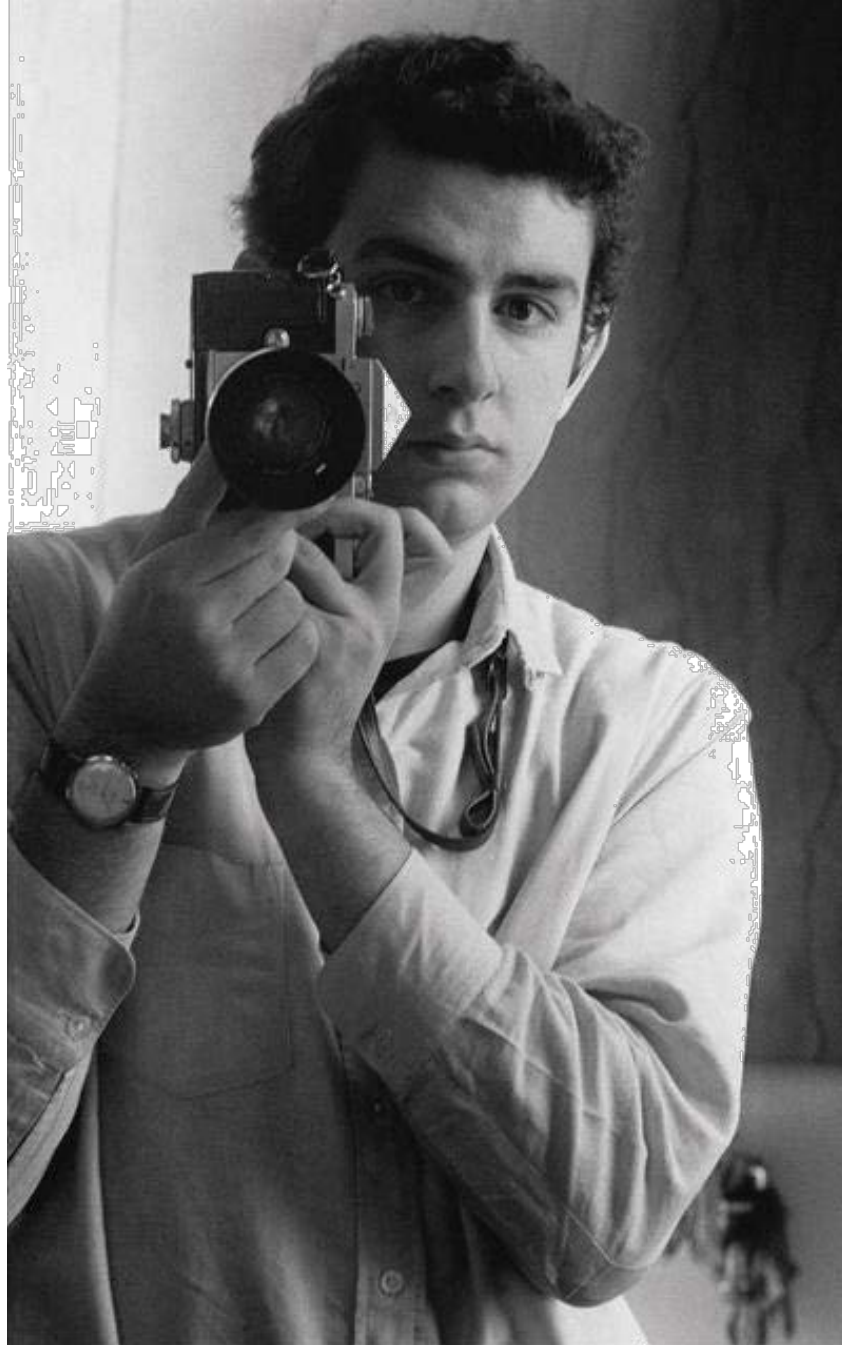


Figure 9. Danny Lyon. *Self-portrait with my Nikon F Reflex at the University of Chicago*. 1960.

I argue that Post's Belzoni photograph is an example of a white photographer's empathy with blacks. Erina Duganne argues against 'the belief that African American photographers are born with an innate talent to represent their race', as an 'essentialized understanding of the representation of race' (Duganne: 2010 1). She proposes, instead,

a model for considering African American and European American photographers ... without reducing either group into overly broad categories of identity or discussing them and their representations through such binary oppositions as black/white, insider/outsider, and positive/negative images' (Duganne: 2010 4).

Duganne supports her argument by examining the work of white photographers Siskind and Lyon. I believe this is applicable to Post, whose work was influenced by Siskind and other members of the Photo League. Siskind has described the way

the Photo League was related to the [Communist] Party, although they seemed to be independent. The League was dedicated to documentary photography, which, to them, meant using these photographs for propaganda purposes (AG30: box 29, interviews).

Julian Bond remembered Lyon as 'inquisitive, New York-y, rumped' (Lyon: 2010 6). His Jewish background made Lyon a minority in SNCC and may have led to more general feelings of alienation. His mother was Russian-Jewish and his father's German-Jewish family had emigrated to New York in the early 1930s, to escape the Nazis, at about the same time that Post was living in Austria. While Post was a photographer working with fellow professional photographers, Lyon was a photographer in a group of activists and, while sharing their political ideas, his role prevented him from feeling fully part of this group. Rather, he was a kind of participant observer, who "'ran along'" with his camera as fellow activists marched and was arrested with them, but "'could not hold hands and sing'" movement anthems at demonstrations because he always had "'to step out and make a picture'" (Blair: 2007 203).

Edward Robinson, curator of the exhibition *The Young Rebel in American Photography, 1950-1970*, believed that the photographers in the exhibition, which included Lyon, were drawn to outsiders in society because of their own feelings of alienation; in Lyon's case, his being Jewish. Robinson suggests that their photographs of outsiders may have represented vicarious

acts of rebellion. This may particularly be the case for someone from a middle-class background. Sara Blair describes how photography and SNCC activism 'drew Lyon as a mode for self-conscious enactment of the middle-class trauma of breaking the law' (Blair: 2007 204). It is significant that Lyon's later work, including *Conversations with the Dead*, *The Bikeriders*, *Indian Nations* and *The Destruction of Lower Manhattan*, is also unified by his preoccupation with people on the margins of society.

White, Northern photographers Post and Lyon were outsiders in the South. Perhaps because of this, both could relate to blacks. Post's gender made her an outsider within the FSA. I suggest that issues of intersectionality made her an outsider in the South too, where her race and social class set her apart. Her gender would again have been an issue, in a region where white women were a justification for the lynching of black men. Lyon would also have been aware of his status as an outsider. I suggest that Post and Lyon could relate their feelings of temporary dislocation to those of black Americans who were seemingly forever outsiders in their own country.

It is significant that both photographers had African American servants in their family households when they were children. Like Post, Lyon felt great affection for his family's black maid. Describing looking at a photograph of Mattie Brown, he talked with emotion about 'the look on Mattie's face, how it is filled with mystery, dignity and hurt' and how, if he saw her again, he would 'hug her and weep' (Lyon: 2014 218).

The coming together of the white, northern, middle-class Lyon and the black, Southern members of SNCC, with their experiences of living under segregation, may seem on the face of it an improbable match. Yet, as Bond commented, 'rage against the old ways united him and them in common cause' (Lyon: 2010 7). Lyon would later explain how the first photograph he took for SNCC 'signified day one of a two-year journey that would send me across the far expanses of the South, working as a white artist within a black-led movement to end segregation and racial discrimination' (Lampert: 2013 189). 'White' and 'artist' are both significant, as they would create tensions which led ultimately to Lyon leaving the organisation. SNCC eventually ousted white members and moved towards black nationalism, becoming increasingly revolutionary.

The images created by Post and Lyon can usefully be compared with those of black photographers such as Gordon Parks and Robert H. McNeill and with white photographer Siskind. The similarities between the work of the three white photographers and that of Parks and McNeill suggest that being poor and black are not necessarily prerequisites for an empathic representation of African Americans. As discussed, Duganne argues against the assumption of a black vision that is uniquely entitled to represent black subjects. Post's Belzoni photograph may be considered her signature image. It is similar to Parks' *American Gothic* in its empathy with its subject and its explicit invitation to the viewer to share the photographer's view of African Americans. In their formal elegance, careful composition and use of symbolism and light and dark, both photographers use art to convey a political statement.

Post juxtaposes her subject with symbols of the American Dream, as does Parks. *American Gothic* ironically references Grant Wood's identically named painting. As Grant's farmer holds a pitchfork symbolising his independence, so Parks' charwoman holds a broom representing her oppression. Ella Watson, a stenographer, had begun work in the FSA offices at the same time as a similarly qualified white woman. Her colleague progressed; Watson cleaned. Parks, like Post, provides the reader with a carefully written caption. Post's anonymous '*Negro man*' is an everyman who represents the intersection of race and social class in the Deep South. Parks' unnamed '*Government charwoman*' is a symbolic figure who embodies the intersection between race, social class and gender.

Parks' later work is also revealing. Figures 10 and 11 form part of a series created for *Life* magazine in 1956, focusing on a black family in Mobile, Alabama. An exhibition at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia in 2015, featured photographs from this article. In his essay accompanying the exhibition catalogue, Maurice Berger examines the way Parks elicits the viewer's empathy through these images. I suggest that Parks' aims and aesthetic strategies in this series are strikingly similar to those of Post.

Berger makes an interesting point about the immaculately dressed woman in Figure 11, who apparently criticised Parks for failing to notice the visible strap of her slip. Berger suggests that this was intentional; Parks wished us to reject stereotypes about blacks, but, like Post, wanted us to feel empathy. Significantly, however, neither photographer was sentimental. Parks' image,

rather, belonged to a tradition of 'affirmative pictures [which] helped negate caustic and pervasive stereotypes, emboldening African Americans against the ruthless forces of intolerance' (Berger: 2015 17). I suggest that Post's work also belonged to this tradition, her white, middle-class background notwithstanding.

Like Post, Parks has composed his photograph carefully. The parallel lines of the awning and the sidewalk converge in the middle distance behind the two figures, making them, and the 'colored entrance' sign above them, the focus of the image. This recalls the way our attention is drawn to the man in Post's Belzoni photograph, who is framed by the parallel lines of staircase and shadow and who is poised ironically below the sign reading 'Good for life!'.



Figure 10. Gordon Parks. *Department Store, Mobile, Alabama*. 1956.

Figure 12 shows a group of young black children *Outside Looking In*; an explicit comment on segregation. Art historian Diana McClintock commented that Parks' intention in this image, as in others, was to 'elicit empathy' (McClintock: 2015).



Figure 11. Gordon Parks. *Outside Looking In*. Mobile, Alabama. 1956.

Berger argues that the photographs in this series are among Parks' most important, for

these quiet, compelling photographs were tactical players in his aesthetic campaign for civil rights, eliciting a reaction he believed was vital to the undoing of racial prejudice: empathy ... the photographs helped readers of *Life* to see and understand their own stake in the story of civil rights (Berger: 2015 15).

I suggest that Post's quietly compelling image of a lone black man climbing the stairs to the entrance of a segregated movie theater is part of Post's aesthetic campaign to make her viewers aware of their stake in racial justice.

Parks clearly has considerable empathy with his subjects. This can also be seen in the work of another radical black photographer, Robert H. McNeill. While Parks had a difficult childhood, however, McNeill enjoyed a relatively comfortable early life and, like Post and Lyon, a university education. This did not detract from his ability to empathise with the African Americans he photographed for a WPA project in segregated Virginia in 1938. Like Post, he took advantage of the opportunities offered by his official work to pursue his own personal interests. Nicholas Natanson has commented on McNeill's vision, which 'had been on display in Virginia, questioning assumptions Left and Right, white and black – and generating, if not a sustained rebellion, at least moments of transcendence' (Natanson: 1996 117). We can see examples of this in McNeill's series on tobacco workers and longshoremen, which include images of unemployed or underemployed workers. While not part of McNeill's official remit, they were of as much concern to him as their fully-employed colleagues. Post had similar concerns, commenting in a letter to Stryker in February 1939, on the time casual workers in Florida spent waiting for work:

A woman the other day told me how she'd been waiting around the packing house all day long. They were told there'd be *some* work. Finally something came in and they got *nine minutes'* work (Hurley: 1989 39-40).

In another photograph, taken in New York as part of his *Bronx Slave Market* series, McNeill made use of symbolism in a similar way to Post, here in the ironic juxtaposition of the poster inviting the three black figures standing underneath to 'make a wish', echoing the black man pictured below 'Good for life!' in the poster in Post's image. McNeill also makes use of shadows to create an atmosphere of foreboding which contrasts with the cheerful message on the wall. In these and many other photographs, McNeill succeeded in creating images which reflected the dignity of African Americans living under segregation during the Depression. Like Post and Lyon, he clearly asks us to empathise with, rather than sympathise with, his subject. Like Post and Lyon, he uses art to make a forceful political statement.

These black photographers did not have a unique vision, however. As noted above, Post was a contemporary of the white photographer Aaron Siskind at the New York Photo League in the early 1930s. Parks described the collection of Siskind's photographs which became the *Harlem Document* as 'a mirror or my own past' (Siskind: 1991 Foreword). They are noteworthy for their complex portrayal of life in Harlem. They are notable, too, for their creation by a white photographer, whose sensitivity to the black experience combined with his aesthetic and formal concerns to create art with a strong political message. Paul Strand observed in an interview with Carl Chiarenza that

the League's attitude interested me very much. They were as much concerned with the techniques and the esthetics of the medium as they were in the content of the pictures. The people in the Photo League never tried to separate the craftsmanship and the esthetic of photography from the core of meaning (AG87: box 3, file 4).

Siskind's photograph of an African American melon-seller has formal similarities with Post's Belzoni photograph, in its careful composition and use of timing. The man is caught in mid-movement, just as, in Post's image, her subject is caught at exactly the right point as he ascends the stairs of the movie theater. As in Post's image, too, the use of light and dark is important; perhaps significantly, the man faces away from the dark side of the street. His straight posture is also important.

It is useful to consider two further images by Siskind. These are two versions of *Boy on a Tricycle* (Figures 12 (a) and 12 (b)), which show a small boy using a tricycle to deliver goods. The first version of the image was not published in the *Harlem Document*, but it is interesting to compare the two photographs, which show how Siskind's use of shadow in the second version significantly adds to the atmosphere of menace in this image. In the first version, the boy looks away from the viewer and we cannot see his face. He appears vulnerable and alone, but the image lacks the sense of danger created by the intruder's shadow in the second version. In this second version, the boy looks back at an unseen presence, indicated only by a shadow. His eyes are hidden and his expression unreadable, but a sense of foreboding is created by the shadow of the intruder, which reaches from beyond the frame of the photograph to meet the shadow formed by the boy and his tricycle. The careful composition and timing, the boy caught by the photographer as turns to look behind him, echo the details of Post's composition, as does Siskind's

symbolic use of shadow, light and dark and the lone, vulnerable figure. Like Post, Siskind has combined social and formal concerns, using art to strengthen his message.



Figures 12 (a) and 13 (b). Aaron Siskind. *Boy on a Tricycle*. n.d.

Siskind's work has connections with that of both Post and Lyon. Like Post, Siskind shared the Photo League's interest in combining the social and formal concerns of photography; like Lyon, he was Jewish. Interestingly, Siskind's formalism has been interpreted by Daniel Morris as a means of creating

distance between himself and the African American 'other' in his *Harlem Document* series: 'Aestheticism, Jewish Identity and Representing the Other', as he describes it (Morris: 2011 41). An equally or even more viable argument, however, can be made for it as a means of identification, as it is also in the formalism of Lyon's work.

It is clear from these comparisons that Post represented African Americans in an empathic way which many commentators believe is unique to black photographers, but which scholars such as Duganne believe is not innate, as discussed above. This ability enabled her to express her passionately held beliefs in racial equality and the need for fundamental change in society. It enabled Post, a photographer who was radicalised by her life experiences, to create an activist image.

'AN EMOTIONAL INVESTMENT IN A MESSAGE ON RACE'

I argue that close analysis of Post's Belzoni photograph reveals that it shares many of the attributes of the iconic image and that its subject matter and formal qualities also suggest that it is an activist image. Indeed, as Teri Sforza suggests in a review of Post's work in 1988, 'perhaps everything is summed up in her famous picture of a man climbing an outdoor staircase to the black entrance of a movie theater' (Sforza: nd).

Elizabeth Abel explains that Jim Crow photographs were surprisingly rare, being

too offensive to enlist the aesthetic interest of Northern photographers such as Walker Evans (whose extensive representation and collection of vernacular signs includes only one example of Jim Crow) and too routine to capture the attention of Southern documentarians, the signs were surprisingly under-documented and their representations under-displayed' (Abel: 2010 26).

Indeed, Terence Pitt, of the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, observed that he 'thought this image was by Robert Frank in the 1950s, then learned it had been made twenty years earlier by Marion Post Wolcott' (AG114, box 3 file 5). While early white female photographers tried to retain objectivity, Post was part of the later, small group of photographers in the 1930s who found it impossible to ignore the issue of race. It is significant,

however, that what made the Jim Crow signs worthy of documentation to government photographers such as Post also made them too controversial for circulation.

The earliest known photograph of a segregated movie theater recorded the opening night of the Rex Theater in Hannibal, Missouri in 1912. It portrayed African Americans sealed off in the balcony, watching from a different perspective. By the 1930s, the interest of photographers had shifted to the outside of segregated movie theaters and the portrayal of the separate black audience. Abel explains how the 1910s saw an increasing interest in the concept of the 'generic spectator', describing how

the emerging movie industry clearly stood to gain from reconstituting ethnically and economically diverse audiences with specific viewing expectations and traditions into a standardized and consequently predictable spectator (Abel: 2010 199).

Jacqueline Stewart (2003) argues that

for black spectators the segregated seating complicated the process of forgetting one's social self and becoming completely absorbed into an increasingly self-enclosed diegesis. Thus, in terms of the cinema's development as a social institution, rhetoric about cinema as a "universal language" or "democratic art" ... did not fully extend to black spectators (Stewart: 2003 672).

It was thus highly ironic that these ideas about the universality of the cinema were developing in public discourse while African Americans were segregated from the white audience.

The black balcony was walled off from the rest of the theater and accessible only via exterior stairs. The development of segregated movie theaters was both encouraged and made visible by the Depression; economic problems had led both to the closure of many black theaters and to the decision to segregate white theaters in an attempt to increase revenue. At the same time, the Depression brought documentary photographers, including Post, to the South.

The balcony was variously known by whites as 'crow's nest', 'buzzard's roost', 'pigeon's roost', 'peanut gallery' and 'nigger heaven', making explicit the association with Jim Crow. The humiliation of being part of the segregated audience was recalled by John Lewis, who later worked with Lyon, as 'an insult to have to sit up there. I felt it intensely. To this day, I rarely go out to the

movies. The memory of sitting up in that balcony is just too strong' (Maltby, et al: 2007 37).

Robert C. Allen comments that segregated movie theaters were not just about the assertion of white power: 'Jim Crow laws and practices were a reaction against the increased visibility of blacks in the urban public sphere as well as their increased economic and spatial mobility within that sphere' (Maltby, et al: 2007 37). Segregation was thus both a reaction to increasing black assertiveness and an attempt to protect whites against 'contamination'. Such fears were most pronounced in urban areas, where there was greater contact between blacks and whites.

The black audience was far from homogenous, however. Jacqueline Stewart has observed that class differences within the African American community were exposed by movie-going, explaining how 'the composition of black audiences (like other audiences) could vary along lines of class, age, and gender, producing different combinations which could alter the sense of the black public of which spectators formed a part' (Stewart: 2003 666). Allen comments that as the black movie-going audience was fractured by this growing class awareness, the white audience was held together by the property of whiteness; for whites, colour transcended class. In the rural South, many blacks would not have participated in the movie-going experience at all. But the cinema was a new type of leisure activity, representing growing modernity. Where blacks in the rural South did start to visit the movies, this can be seen as part of a transition from the old agrarian South to the urban modernity of the north. Black migration to the large cities of the north had reached its peak in the 1920s, but continued throughout the 1930s, the period when Post's photograph was taken. Post's interest in modernity is thus clearly reflected in her exploration of this theme in this image, just as she, the young, urban, female professional with a camera and a strong desire for social justice, represented modernity.

This preoccupation with social justice is made explicit not only by the subjects of Post's images, but through their aesthetic qualities. An article in *Artweek* in June 1988 described her image of the man entering the movie theatre as an example of her 'graphically powerful depictions of the pervasive presence of racism' (AG114, box 6, file 9). The Fresno Arts Center schedule of events for spring 1985 expressed it even more strongly, commenting that 'Post Wolcott's eye

for strong pictorial organization is an essential part of her talent for communicating vital human experience' (AG114, box 5, file 8). In this image, the African American man's shadow falls behind him, onto a poster advertising the movie being shown in the theatre and connects the anonymous black man with the actor in the poster. *Feud of the Range* was released early in 1939, starring the B-Western actor, Bob Steele. We can interpret these figures as the black male viewer and the white male ego ideal. They are presented as mirror images. The actor's face forms a reflection of the black man's. Each wears a broad-brimmed hat, each is alone, against a black background and in three-quarter view, with head turned towards the camera, but not looking directly at the viewer. The black man's shadow links him to 'Cowboy Bob' in a wholly ironic way. Bob Steele plays the white hero who intervenes in a dispute between a rancher and a railroad representative who wants his land to build a rail line across the territory. The cowboy's role is to stop these plans and ensure the rancher retains his land. The ironies of this plot would not have been lost upon Post, as she observed this black man who had little chance of ever owning his own land; and would presumably not have been lost upon the man himself.

'Cowboy dreams' and 'the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow' are not for Bob's mirror image, walking away from him up the stairs towards the dark, unwelcoming entrance to the theatre where he will view the white actor.

The shadow following the man as he ascends the stairs is interesting also because of its ambiguity. It is larger than the solitary figure and as it looms behind him suggests that the man is perhaps leading others who follow him towards the segregated entrance. The shadow may thus represent a threat. There are suggestions in the literature that the balcony may have been a site of black resistance; popcorn was frequently thrown down onto the white audience below, for example, 'tossing down projectiles or imagining tossing them down, may be the condition of possibility of staying and watching the movie', as Abel describes it (Abel: 2010 245). And the white audience didn't seem to realise that 'we sit above them, that we can drop things down on them and crush them, that we can swoop down from this Nigger Heaven and take their seats' (Abel: 2010 247).

It is notable that it was only the segregated space in movie theaters which produced this narrative of resistance. Abel comments that,

by identifying a space that produces a distinctive narrative, Jim Crow photographs move the colored balcony from a barely visible and passive social background to a significant narrative catalyst and frame. Inscribing the balcony in the annals of racial chronotopes (the plantation and the slave ship are better-known and more horrific examples), the conjunction of images and stories function as an optic into the contradictory forces that converge in the segregated theater: the ideological forces the apparatus serves and the racial inversions the viewing structure mandates. This conjunction's paradoxical nature made it memorable for those seated at its crossroads: at no other Jim Crow site was seduction packaged together with the means to resist it, or humiliation with the tools of revenge (Abel: 2010 247).

Post may therefore have perceived the man's movement towards the balcony as an act of resistance, as discussed above, rather than acquiescence. This further reinforces an interpretation of the photograph as a demand that the viewer recognises the subject as someone who deserves our empathy; that we should neither pity him nor see him as a powerless victim, but share the outrage which Post feels on his behalf. This reflects Post's radical position on race and clearly demonstrates her affinity not with her FSA colleagues and other contemporary liberal commentators, but with the later politics and aims of Lyon and his fellow activists in SNCC, which supports my argument that this image should be interpreted as an activist photograph and that Post can be seen as activist photographer. The lone man in this image may thus be interpreted as a figure of defiance. It also reflects Post's interest in exploring the complexity of the black experience in the South. Ultimately, however, it was not this potential for resistance which ultimately brought about the end of the segregated movie theatre. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, Hollywood films exploring racism reflected the expectations which had been raised by World War II. Such films included *Pinky* (1949), *Home of the Brave* (1949), *No Way Out* (1950) and *Bright Victory* (1951). By the late 1950s, the issue was beginning to be addressed by the civil rights movement to which Lyon was drawn in 1962. In July 1964, a lengthy lineage of civil rights activism finally forced passage of the Civil Rights Act, which made segregation illegal.

We cannot see this man's face, nor is he named in the caption. His anonymity recalls that of the subjects of the iconic photographs by Capa, Rosenthal and Lange and serves the same purpose. For like them, Post's solitary unidentified man is everyman, an iconic figure representing suffering experienced by a large portion of the population. The photograph shows the

relation between white and black through the contrast between the 'white men only' restroom door and the smaller one, which is not labelled, but is situated under the 'COLORED ADM' sign. This echoes the disparity between the sizes of the white and colored drinking fountains in Lyon's photograph, described below. The 'colored' sign was a target for critics of segregation, as it symbolised the system's inequalities. African Americans were usually referred to by whites as 'colored', rather than 'black', which was considered too narrow a definition. 'Negro', with an upper case 'N', was the term preferred by African Americans themselves, who saw it as an objective and scientific label. W. E. B. Du Bois, for example, considered this the preferred term. It is also notable that such signs rarely stated 'for' colored people, while when African Americans established their own institutions, they used the form 'for Negroes', creating a sense of positive communal space which affirms the identity of the group. It is therefore significant that Post employs the term 'Negro' in her caption, distancing her caption from the 'COLORED ADM' sign in her image. This makes explicit her empathy with her black subject in this photograph and, through him as a universalised figure, with the African American population in the South. This further supports my argument for Post's activism and for this image as a precursor of civil rights photography. Post also adds quotation marks to the word 'colored' which unambiguously marks her opposition to this offensive term. Interestingly, both Post and Lange took photographs of the Rex Theatre for Colored People, in Leland, Mississippi. Lange's caption retains the original 'colored', while Post's caption reads, *The Rex Theatre for Negro People*.

Might Post have posed this image? And does it matter? As mentioned earlier, the three well-known photographs by Capa, Rosenthal and Lange have all been the subjects of controversy. Capa's falling soldier may have been acting rather than dying; Rosenthal's photograph actually shows 'Old Glory' being raised for the second time; and Lange's image is the final shot in a carefully directed series of six. None of which detracts from their power. This question does not appear to have been discussed in the literature on Post's image, but it certainly bears some consideration. It seems odd, for example, that there was but a single person entering the movie theatre; it might be expected that more people would have been approaching the balcony entrance, or standing around the foot of the stairs. It also seems fortuitous that the man is caught exactly mid-point between the shadow from the balcony

entrance and the poster, just as the shadow neatly bisects the clock and as the man's shadow looms behind him.

It seems unlikely, however, that Post directed the scene. Indeed, in 'Woman to Woman', an interview with Pat Mitchell in 1989 for the *Today Show*, she commented that she 'had to take that photograph and had to take it right away. You couldn't pose it... that's your gut reaction' (AG114, box 6, file 6). If the movie had already started and the man was a late-comer, then there may well not have been any other people in the vicinity. The photograph may therefore have been opportunistic. Another possibility is that Post may not have actively posed the man, but simply waited until the solitary figure she wanted appeared. It seems unlikely that a black man would have been amenable to being directed by a young, northern, white female photographer. Post may well have studied the movement of the sun over the entrance to the movie theatre over a period of days before taking the photograph, to achieve the desired effect with the shadows. Indeed, she clearly demonstrates with this self-reflexive daylight exterior shot that the screening is – as painted in text on the wall – a 'MATINEE'. So, it is reasonable to assume that the aesthetic qualities of the photograph were the result of careful timing and planning on Post's part, rather than active direction.

Post created several iconic photographs representing African Americans. Figure 13 (a) forms part of a series of uncaptioned images taken in Natchez, Mississippi in August 1940. They have not been discussed in the literature. Her subject is a single, unnamed figure; an everywoman, representing the intersection of race, social class and gender. The black woman's symbolic white load dominates the photograph. Her burden is heavy, but her posture strong; recalling images of women in developing countries bearing heavy loads. Indeed, while living in Iran in 1960, Post created an image of women in similar pose (Figure 13 (b)).



Figure 13 (a). Marion Post. *Natchez, Mississippi*. August 1940



Figure 13 (b). Marion Post. *Women Carrying Water*, Iran, c. 1960.

Post was determined to portray African Americans as resilient and dignified and not to perpetuate stereotypes. In 'Woman to Woman', an interview with Pat Mitchell for the *Today Show* in 1989, Post explains that she

did try to show the Blacks having a good time, despite their difficult situation and the tough life they had, they really still had the joy of being dancers ... and I wanted to show that too, so I took the picture which we call "Jitter-Bugs" (AG114, box 6, file 6).

Figure 14 portrays a group of African Americans in an environment they had created. They are in their own public space. There are no symbols of white culture in this space, in which a young couple dances exuberantly.

As elsewhere, Post uses the affirmative 'Negro' to describe her subjects. The alliteration in 'jitterbugging' and 'juke joint', together with the contrast between the four-syllable 'jitterbugging' and the single-syllabled 'juke' and 'joint' echo the dance rhythm. As in her Belzoni image, Post's subjects are anonymous; everyman and everywoman. We see their faces, but, like the man in Belzoni, they do not make eye contact with us. They look downwards only to

maintain the harmony of their dance. They are iconic figures, like the man in Belzoni. However, while he walks around the margins of white space, this couple revels in space they have made their own.



Figure 14. Marion Post. *Jitterbugging in Negro juke joint, Saturday evening, outside Clarksdale, Mississippi.* November 1939.

This question does not arise with Lyon's image, devoid as it is of human figures, although he presumably timed his shooting carefully, deliberately waiting until the courthouse was empty before he took his photograph. Lyon's photograph goes further. As Raiford describes it, 'Lyon's photograph plainly depicts the horrific reality of black people in Albany. As the perfect visual metaphor for 'Jim Crow', this photograph, like many others of its type, mobilized the protest movement' (Raiford: 2003 280). This image does not

include any human figures, the focus being solely on the two water fountains and the segregation signs above them.

While other civil rights photographers, such as Elliott Erwitt, were also engaged with the subject of segregated washrooms and drinking fountains, it is notable that they included African American subjects. That Lyon chose not to do so perhaps indicates his awareness that including people in the study risked evoking pity in the viewer. Instead, the stark scene, with the marks on the wall where the African Americans had to bend down to reach their fountain the only indication of human presence - a collective chafing against and colouring of an otherwise white wall - elicits our anger, in much the same way as does Post's photograph. Like Post, Lyon uses his photograph as an emblem, a universal symbol of suffering experienced by the African American population. In so doing, both photographs make specific historical moments readily accessible to individuals both at the time and later.

What provokes even stronger feelings of outrage in today's viewer is the fact that these photographs were taken a generation apart, but as the later image shows, little progress had been made in the intervening years. Both photographs were taken in black and white and, without the caption indicating their dates, they could easily have been taken during the same period, even on the same day.

Like Post, Lyon took great care with his composition. His images reflected the interest in the aesthetics of documentary photography which is characteristic of the photography of the Photo League. Joan Murray has described the way in which his work 'goes beyond documentation because of his continual concern for compositional elements within an image' and his 'exceptional ability to consider design elements in a picture' (AG114, box 8, file Reviews I). The larger 'white' fountain is located in the centre of the image and forms its focus. To its left, the 'colored' fountain is both smaller and lower, forcing blacks to hold onto the wall as they bent over to use it, in a gesture of subservience. The viewer's eye is thus drawn from the lowest object in the left of the image, to the larger fountain in the centre and, finally, to the largest object, which is situated on the right of the image. It is the largest object, but we see only part of it. The careful, simple quality of the composition is enhanced by Lyon's decision to create his image in black and white. As with

Post's photograph, this use of black and white creates a feeling of starkness. It suggests the binary nature of Southern culture. As in Post's image, it creates an important symbolic effect, which works with its sense of timelessness to elevate a study of a specific issue to a study of a universal theme of suffering; both images, like their creators, become Southern icons in black and white. Through these qualities, then, both photographers make it easy for the viewer to recognise the themes being explored and to identify with the emotion of the photographers, both of whom ask us to share their affinity with blacks and their feelings of outrage at the system which imposed segregation upon the black community.

Like Post, Lyon distances himself from the offensive label 'colored'. Indeed, he goes further, choosing to define the subject of his image simply as *Segregated Drinking Fountains*, a direct, blunt description of what the 'colored' and 'white' signs represent. This leaves the viewer in no doubt about either the subject of the photograph or the feelings of its creator. Lyon is careful to include details of the location of this segregated facility, which is, ironically, in a county courthouse; a seat of justice. This echoes the ironic juxtapositions used by Post in the composition of her image. As in Post's image, the photographer's anger is implicit in the understated caption, which requires no further elaboration or comment from the creator of the image.

Like the iconic photographs discussed earlier, both Lyon's and Post's images were used again for purposes which reflect their original radical political aims. Discussing the later use of Lyon's photograph, Abel describes its inclusion in a poster created by Guillermo Prado in 1995 (Figure 16). Lyon's image is incorporated into the poster 'not only as a reminder of the past into which the present threatens to devolve, but also, provocatively tilted at an angle, as a reinforcement of the poster's rhetoric of outrage rather than pity' (Abel: 1999 465). This poster was designed to protest against the dismantling of affirmative action programmes that had been introduced to counter the effects of segregation. It reminds us that racial discrimination has not yet been eliminated and that removing affirmative action may result in the reinstatement of segregation. The use of Lyon's image in this way affirms its iconic status and recalls the way Lange's *Migrant Mother* was used later to try to raise funds for its subject, Florence Thompson. The selection of this specific image cannot have been accidental. Erwit's iconic drinking fountains would have been the

obvious choice, but was passed over for a more aggressive image by an activist photographer.

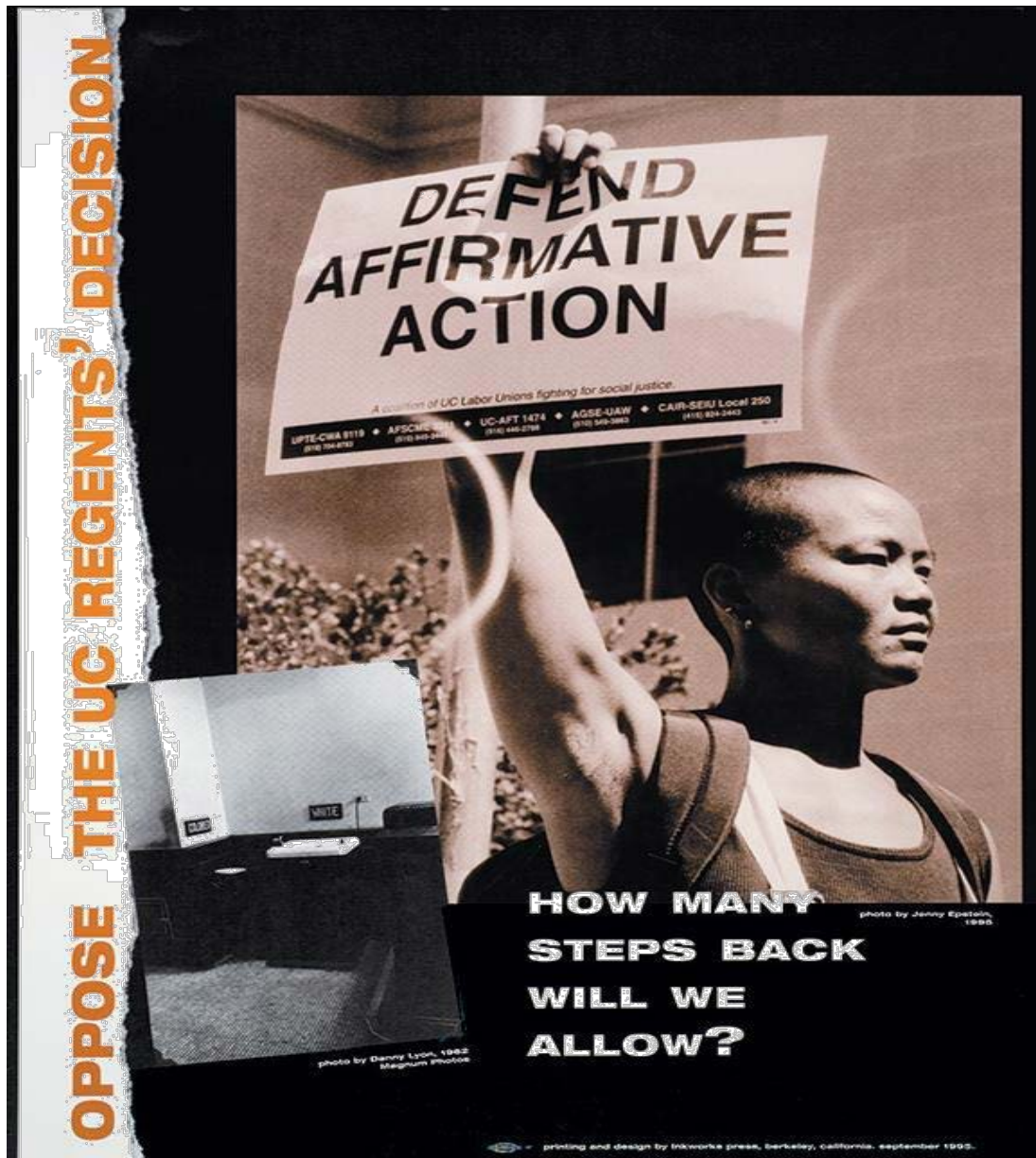


Figure 15. Guillermo Prado. Untitled poster [with photograph by Danny Lyon, inset]. 1995.

Post's iconic image, unseen when first created, nevertheless enjoyed an important afterlife. A letter to Post from William Stage in September 1987 requests permission to reproduce the image in his forthcoming book, *Ghost Signs* (AG114, box 1, file19). Rather poignantly, as this was the year of Post's death, it was included as an illustration in the Bank of America Desk Diary for

1990 (AG11, box 5, file 9). Most significantly, it appeared in the New York Times in a review by exiled white South African journalist Donald Woods of the television series *Eyes on the Prize* in 1987 (Figure 13) (AG114, box 8, file Reviews II).



Figure 16. Marion Post. A Scene from 'Awakenings: 1954-1956' the Initial Segment in the Six-part Documentary Series 'Eyes on the Prize'. New York Times. 18 January 1987.

Woods analyses the parallels and differences between segregation and apartheid, further universalising Post's image. He emphasises the role of African Americans in bringing about change themselves, commenting on the success of the civil rights movement in achieving 'the realization of the national

ideal through the dedication of black Americans... the prize was achieved primarily because black Americans insisted on entering into their American inheritance' (Woods: 1987 1) This corresponds closely with Post's concern to portray black Americans as possessing agency, not as passive victims awaiting the intervention of sympathetic liberal whites. The image has a new caption, *A Scene from 'Awakenings: 1954-1956' the Initial Segment in the Six-Part Documentary Series 'Eyes on the Prize'*. There is no reference here to segregation, nor any use of words describing racial difference, such as 'Negro' or 'colored'. Instead, the caption employs the words 'awakenings' and 'prize', suggesting action and fulfilment. The image was used to illustrate the first episode of the series, which establishes the context of segregation within which the civil rights movement operated. An explicit link is thus made between Post's 1939 image and the civil rights issues of the 1950s. This confirms both Post's role as an activist photographer and her images as presaging civil rights photography. This later use of her photograph also reinforces its claim as an iconic image, in the same way that the use of Lyon's photograph in a radical poster helped establish the iconic nature of his image.

The importance of both photographs was thus clearly recognised in the 1980s, when both were used for new purposes. A few years earlier, photographs by Post and Lyon appeared together in an exhibition at the Simon Lowinsky Gallery in San Francisco. In a letter to Post, her friend Catherine Wagner wrote that, 'We (you, me, Danny Lyon and Irving Penn) were all reviewed together last week in the San Francisco Chronicle, did you read it?' (AG114, box 3, file 14).

The review, by Thomas Albright, is interesting because it is a typical example of an early analysis of Post's work. Albright describes how Post joined the FSA

after the department had been asked to shift its emphasis to 'a more balanced' (ie positive) view of rural life. In Wolcott's case, this policy shift may have been a blessing, for her most convincing photographs are ... more lyrical pictures... in which the landscape, the seasons and the elements take precedence (Albright: 1978 36).

Albright assesses Lyon more perceptively, as 'one of the more forceful of the socially conscious photographers to emerge in the 1950s' (Albright: 1978 36). It is significant that Albright makes a connection between Lyon and the early work of the FSA, suggesting that he was responding to the way in which Robert

Frank had 'redirected the attention of another generation to the kinds of subject matter in which the FSA documentation had specialized during its heyday', but makes no connection between the later photographer and Post, nor between Post and the early FSA work that he clearly admires. (Albright: 1978 36).

* * *

Post and Lyon were iconic photographers working in the South. A generation apart, they shared the same moral concerns, radical political ideas and desire for social justice and racial equality. What emerges most clearly from these photographs is their drive to express their personal concern with the issue of segregation and the personal courage required by both to achieve this expression.

They created Southern icons possessing the iconic qualities attributed to better-known images. Their universalising quality enables them to make an emotional impact upon individuals both at the time and later. They are easily recognisable by viewers outside the United States, helping orient the viewer within a larger, collective experience, better to understand a historical experience. They use symbolism to explore specific issues which represent the broad humanist themes of social justice and democracy. Most importantly, they represent resistance to authority, rather than the upholding of existing power structures. They are a call to action in a 'radical, accusatory voice' which is strengthened by their aesthetic formalism (McEuen: 2004 171). Both photographers use the striking aesthetic qualities of their work to help convey their moral and political messages, making an unambiguous and unapologetically emotional appeal to the viewer. The later use of these photographs reinforced their significance. Both images were used in ways which reflected their creators' original purpose. The incorporation of Lyon's work into Prado's poster in 1995 further universalises it and reaffirms its iconic status, as does the use by the *New York Times* of Post's image in 1987.

In her portrayal of a lone black man entering a movie theater in a small Southern town, Post had created an everyman. This anonymous figure symbolises the impact of segregation on African Americans in the South. He

also represents the radical ideas and desire to bring about change through political activism of a remarkable young female photographer. The image belongs to a canon of activist images. The unknown man in this image is an iconic figure created by an iconic activist photographer.

CHAPTER THREE

‘AN INFLUENTIAL WAY’: UNIONISATION, STRIKE ACTION AND ACTIVIST PHOTOGRAPHY

As we have seen, when Post joined the FSA in 1938, she found herself part of a group of white liberal documentarians. She had more in common with the black radical activists in SNCC and with Danny Lyon, their white radical photographer. Post's iconic image of a black man entering a segregated movie theater in Mississippi reflected her determination to expose and combat America's persistent racial inequalities. The young photographer was also motivated by a further, related political issue which was not fully explored by the FSA, that of socio-economic class. In particular, Post wished to use her images to examine unionisation and strike action and through them to make a radical call for action on behalf of the working class.

In this chapter, I shall examine selected images from two series of photographs taken by Post in Appalachia. As context, section one examines Appalachian culture and the history of unionisation in this region. The work which Post completed for Frontier Films before she joined the FSA is explored in section two. In section three, I discuss strike images taken during Post's time with the FSA. I suggest that it is significant that her work for both organisations also contains images of children, illustrating the impact of harsh working conditions on family life. I argue that both series provide evidence of Post's desire to use photography as a medium through which to express her views on the issues of race and class. Post was specifically concerned with the failure of the New Deal to tackle the civil rights issues of lynching, segregation and the black vote. She was also interested in the ways trades unions could address social inequality. Through these images she also made her call for action to bring about social justice through a radical restructuring of society.

As discussed in chapter one, the New Deal made only limited improvements to people's lives during the Depression. It failed, in particular, to address economic inequality, segregation and the vote; the central problems facing the African American community. Roosevelt introduced two pieces of legislation which directly affected Appalachia. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), established in May 1933, was intended to address the

specific economic and environmental concerns of the region. In July 1935, the National Labor Relations Act (popularly known as the Wagner Act), legalised industrial action for the first time.

I referred in chapter two to Stryker's cautious interpretation of his brief. Stryker was keen to avoid controversy. He therefore tried to steer the FSA photographers away from the sensitive issues of racial and social inequality, in particular, lynching, segregation and the black vote, and unionisation and strike action. This chapter will show how Post courageously both addressed these subjects in her photography and, in the two series of images analysed here, unambiguously called for action. For, while it is true that several of Post's FSA colleagues, including John Vachon, Arthur Rothstein and Dorothea Lange, did take photographs of strikes, it is notable that none of their images portrays the harsh conditions against which the coal miners of West Virginia were protesting. Nor do their captions reveal the close identification with their subjects which is so transparent in Post's descriptions.

These differences become clear when we compare *Employees of Coca-Cola plant on strike, Sikeston, Missouri* (1940) (Figure 1), an image by John Vachon and *Copper miners on strike waiting for scabs to come out of mines* (1939) (Figure 9), one of Post's photographs taken for the FSA. The group of men in Vachon's image gather around the placard, framing what is the focal point of the image. They appear well-dressed and relaxed, smiling or half-smiling at the photographer and the viewer. The men do not include derogatory or provocative words on their placard. They do use emotive language, but here it is a statement explaining the rationale behind their strike. It thus justifies their action to their management. Equally importantly, it also communicates their motivation to passers-by, presumably in an attempt to gain the support of the public. Vachon's caption tells us that the men are employed by Coca-Cola, so the reference to children in the placard was probably an attempt to appeal in particular to the parents of young children. The key words of the placard, 'CLOTHES', 'CHILDREN', 'ENOUGH' and 'EAT' appear in upper case, encouraging the viewer to focus on the emotional appeal of the men's message; to consider a situation in which the children of working parents are nevertheless without sufficient clothing or food.

This wording has presumably been deliberately chosen to echo Roosevelt's words in his second inaugural speech, on 20 January 1937, in which he said that he saw 'one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished' (Roosevelt: 1937). Indeed, it is possible that Stryker asked Vachon to record this strike for exactly this reason. The image certainly represents what may be thought of as the 'acceptable' face of industrial action, taken by well-dressed, unthreatening men with moderate and completely understandable demands. This accords with Stryker's wish for photographs which reflected the liberal ethos of the New Deal, with its emphasis on limited reform within existing social structures. However, Vachon offers the reader a limited interpretation of this scene in his caption.



Figure 1. John Vachon. *Employees of Coca-Cola plant on strike, Sikeston, Missouri. May 1940.*

Vachon's caption provides little indication of his feelings towards the striking workers. His one sentence title fails to inform the viewer of the precise nature of the strikers' employment; their clothes suggest that they are engaged in less physically demanding and dangerous work than the miners, but Vachon does not comment on this. Nor does he elaborate on the

background to the strike. The placard in the image clearly suggests that it is related to pay, rather than working conditions, but this issue is not explored by Vachon. It is impossible to tell what Vachon feels about his subjects from this bland statement of fact. His caption is thus suggestive of the documentary photography which characterised the FSA, rather than the activism which motivated Post.

Post took a radical stance on the issue of unionisation and strike action. She 'captured the poor at play: gambling, jitterbugging, hepcatting. She also, as no-one else, got pictures of strikers' (AG 114, box 8, file 'Wolcott/Stryker letters I'). The miners in Post's photograph use deliberately antagonistic language to confront and condemn betrayal by their strike-breaking colleagues. It is notable that the language used by Post in her captions reflects that of her subjects. For example, the miners' placard in Figure 9 uses the slang term 'scab' to refer to strike-breakers and Post also uses this terminology in her caption. This activist caption reinforces the call for action made by her photography. In the context of a strike, watching is by no means passive. It helps to draw battle lines and identify the opposition, from corporate board members to their lowliest lackeys, who cross this picket line as they fail to honour the strike. With success predicated upon solidarity and collective bargaining, the individual strike-breakers, or scabs, would seem to threaten all workers' livelihoods as they threaten the collective capacity to improve pay and conditions.

Post's views on unionisation were formed early in her life. She had been influenced most notably as a child, by her mother, who was openly sympathetic to unions. Post described how, later on, her mother lost her job because of her union activity, explaining that

for her part in this she was subsequently fired. The union's attempt to get her reinstated failed. After 15-20 years of service, with no warning, she was given two weeks' notice, with pay ... That was it – she was devastated and became a political activist (AG 114, box 6, file 8).

As discussed in chapter one, Post was also devastated by the way her mother was treated. This episode served to further reinforce Post's views on labour and the need for co-operation and unionisation in the workplace. Post actively demonstrated her interest in this subject through the photographs she took for

'Consumer co-operatives', an article published in *Fortune* magazine in March 1937. This is probably the earliest example of her work on co-operation. Later that year, she would be working for Frontier Films, taking publicity photographs for their documentary about the HFS in Tennessee, which was then working on co-operative and unionisation projects. *People of the Cumberland* was released in 1938. Thus, as is further evidenced below, in comparison to her FSA colleagues, Post championed radical alternatives to corporate capitalist profit-seeking and cost-minimization, highlighting more democratically-managed co-operative enterprises and supporting unionization efforts among underpaid workers in hazardous mines and factories.

'A CULTURAL ICON OF POVERTY AND BACKWARDNESS': APPALACHIA IN THE 1930s

The Appalachia portrayed in *People of the Cumberland* was a poor region. It was geographically isolated and disproportionately affected by the Depression. Formerly dependent upon agriculture, it was by this time reliant on coal-mining. Its isolation had led to the creation of stereotypes about the local population, which became known by the pejorative term 'hillbillies'. There is a vast literature on the history of the region¹. However, I suggest that the colonial model, based on the concept of Orientalism first proposed by Edward Said, is the most useful way to interpret the problems experienced by Appalachia, particularly in the Depression era.

In *Orientalism* (1978), Said argued that Europeans had invented Orientalism to come to terms with, and give a name to, 'one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other... the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience' (Said: 1978 1-2). Said describes Orientalism as a means for the West to dominate the East

¹ Some of the most important works include Richard B. Drake, *A History of Appalachia* (2001); Christopher Dorsey, *Southern West Virginia and the Struggle for Modernity* (2011); and Todd Snyder, *The Rhetoric of Appalachian Identity* (2014)

and to reinforce its own identity by contrast with it. He explained the importance of the concept of the 'other', which reinforced Europeans' belief in their cultural superiority over all non-Europeans; all 'others'. He also proposed Orientalism as a discourse. However, it is significant that Said qualifies his argument by claiming that this discourse has some basis in reality. It is

not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment ... [which has created] an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness (Said: 1978 6).

Said's theory can usefully be applied to Appalachia. The region's relationship with the rest of the United States can be described as 'a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony' (Said: 1978 5). I suggest that poor whites in Appalachia became the 'other' for whites elsewhere in the United States. Indeed, it can be argued that this identity was projected onto them in a similar way in which it was projected onto African Americans, whose 'otherness' further reinforced the assumed racial superiority of whites in the South. Said's theory can thus be used to explain what can be described as internal colonialism within the United States. This, of course, also recalls SNCC leader Forman's interpretation of the situation of blacks in the country, which was discussed in chapter two. Forman described African Americans as living in an enclave within mainstream society. They were in a 'colonial relationship' with white America. This analogy can be usefully applied to Appalachia, though it was home to fewer blacks than the rest of the American South. Significantly, Forman felt that African Americans would only be liberated from this relationship by the destruction of the capitalist system, linking him with Frontier Films, the HFS and with Post.

There were also fundamental differences between white Appalachians and African Americans. While both groups occupied subordinate positions in society, the experience of slavery was unique to African Americans. A further distinction can be observed in union membership. Unionisation was difficult for white Appalachians, but blacks were not only - with the notable exception of the International Workers of World (IWW) - excluded from unions, but used as strike-breakers by the white mine owners, as discussed below.

Said's theory has been used by Helen Matthews Lewis, Linda Johnson and

Donald Askins in *Colonialism in Modern America: the Appalachian Case* (1978) to explain the problems experienced in Appalachia. They are concerned with demonstrating the causes, rather than just the symptoms, of the problems in the region. Lewis *et al* use their 'Colonial Model' as an alternative to what they describe as the 'Culture of Poverty Model', which attributes the problems of Appalachia to the isolation of the region and the supposed deficiencies of the local population. They describe their theory as one which, instead, 'examines the process through which dominant outside industrial interests establish control, exploit the region, and maintain the domination and subjugation of the region' (Lewis *et al*: 1978 2). The outside interests referred to here were the coal companies, who imposed an almost feudal control over the company towns in the region, as discussed below. Furthermore, they cite Richard Drake's work on the 1930s which uses this model, commenting that he saw the 'colonial interpretation continued through the reform movements which arose in the thirties and crystallised in such leaders and organizations as Don West, Myles Horton and the Highlander Folk School' (Lewis *et al*: 1978 2-3). This reflects Post's own concerns, as we can see, for example, in her series of images of the 'idle rich' in Florida, which were intended to show the causes, as well as the results, of the Depression.

Nevertheless, these negative stereotypes persisted throughout the 1930s and indeed beyond. As Ewen says, 'Appalachians themselves are as deeply stereotyped and mythologized as any ethnic group of color in American society' (Ewen: 2004 xii)). The media was an important means of creating and reinforcing stereotypes in the 1930s. Cartoons were particularly effective. Anthony Harkins explains that

hillbilly comics and cartoons mirrored the complex mix of emotions and attitudes of Depression-era audiences. They reflected the widespread public fear of systemic economic and social collapse and daily reporting on the plight of the rural South. Yet these deliberately exaggerated portraits of impoverished, but basically content, Southern folk also provided cheering reassurance that rural poverty was not as bleak as it appeared in news accounts (Harkins: 2004 103-4).

Paul Webb was one of three cartoonists whose work focusing on the hillbilly stereotype began in 1934. His *Mountain Boys* series ran monthly in *Esquire* magazine until the late 1940s. *Wonder if Maw's had her baby yet*, (Figure 2, below) shows the first episode in the series. It does not portray

the 'mountain boys' as working-class types. They are, rather, presented as the 'other'. Harkins comments that

unlike working-class cartoon characters whose identity revolved around their labor and their place in the economic hierarchy, however, the Mountain Boys' identity stemmed from their total disconnection from the real world of work and the social power structure (Harkins: 2004 106).

Significantly, Webb never locates his characters in a specific place within Appalachia, thus adding to the sense that they exist outside of contemporary life. This absolute disconnection from the reader's familiar surroundings contributes to the belief that the 'mountain boys' are ignorant of the real, modern world. As Harkins says, 'because of their seclusion, the hillbillies live in a state of animality and filth' (Harkins: 2004 107).

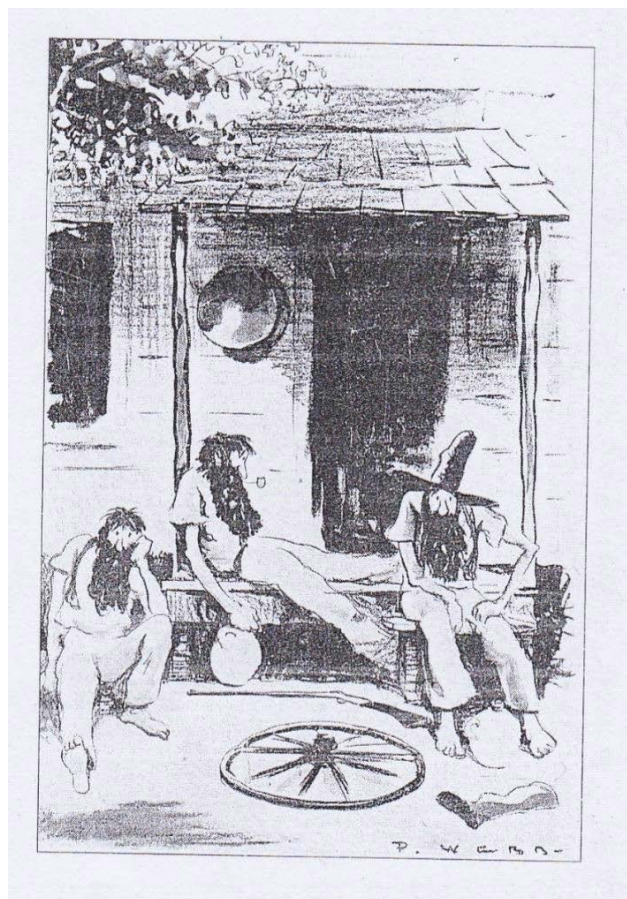


Figure 2. Paul Webb. [The Mountain Boys]. 'Wonder if Maw's had her baby yet – I'm gettin' mighty hongry'. *Esquire*, November 1934 105.

While the 'hillbilly' stereotype suggests that the population of the region consisted entirely of poor whites, there was also a black population in Appalachia, one which had a significant presence in the region's coal mines.

For example, in 1930, while African Americans constituted only 6.6% of the population of West Virginia, they formed 21.8% of all miners (Laing: 1985 71). Most African Americans in West Virginia, where Post took her strike images for the FSA, had migrated from further South, lured mainly by the promise of better wages in the state's coal mines. They were often used as strike-breakers by the coal companies. Independent film director John Sayles talks of 'the transportation of blacks from Alabama and European immigrants just off the boat to scab against the strikers' (Sayles: 1987 10). Race and ethnicity were also significant barriers to unionisation after World War I. Mine operators in West Virginia had long exploited the cultural differences between white Appalachians, African Americans from further South and recently-arrived Italian immigrants. Maintaining what was referred to as a 'judicious mixture' of these groups prevented unions from gaining sufficient unity to challenge the coal companies.

Conditions in the mines and the company towns were poor and unionisation difficult. John Sayles' film *Matewan* (1987) dramatised efforts in 1920 to unionise miners in Matewan, a West Virginian town near the borders of Kentucky and Virginia. In *Thinking in Pictures* (1987), his published account of the making of his film, John Sayles explains that he wanted to examine 'what America has become and what it should be', citing 'individualism versus collectivism, the personal and political legacy of racism, the immigrant dream and the reality that greeted it, monopoly capitalism at its most extreme versus American populism at its most violent' (Sayles: 1987 10). Coal companies quashed union action by controlling virtually every aspect of the coal miners' lives. Miners living in company towns were forced to live in company-owned housing, from which they could be evicted without notice. They were paid in 'company scrip', which could only be exchanged for goods and services in company-owned stores in the town. Church, police force and judiciary were often in the pay of the company. John Sayles describes 'the feudal system of mine guards and "Baldwin thugs"' (that is, private detectives employed by the coal companies) who 'enforced the near slavery the miners and their families lived in' (Sayles: 1987 10).

The unions only gained the unity and confidence to take strike action when class consciousness overcame cultural differences. This theme is explored in *Matewan*, in which white Appalachian, Italian and African American miners are

brought together by Joe Kenehan, the union organiser, who explains to them that the coal company has 'got [them] fightin' white against colored, native against foreign, hollow against hollow, when [they] know there ain't but two sides in this world – them that work and them that don't' (*Matewan*: 1987). This scene, *Fighting for industrial democracy in Matewan*, (Figure 3, below), from *Matewan* shows Joe Kenehan trying to ensure that 'Few Clothes' Johnson, the African American miner, is integrated into the union. As I argue below, Post's radical activism was closely related to that of the IWW, or Wobblies, represented here by Kenehan, which espoused racial inclusivity as a prerequisite for labour unity and the effectiveness of strike action. Figure 3 is significantly described in terms of a heroic ideological battle, 'fighting for industrial democracy.'

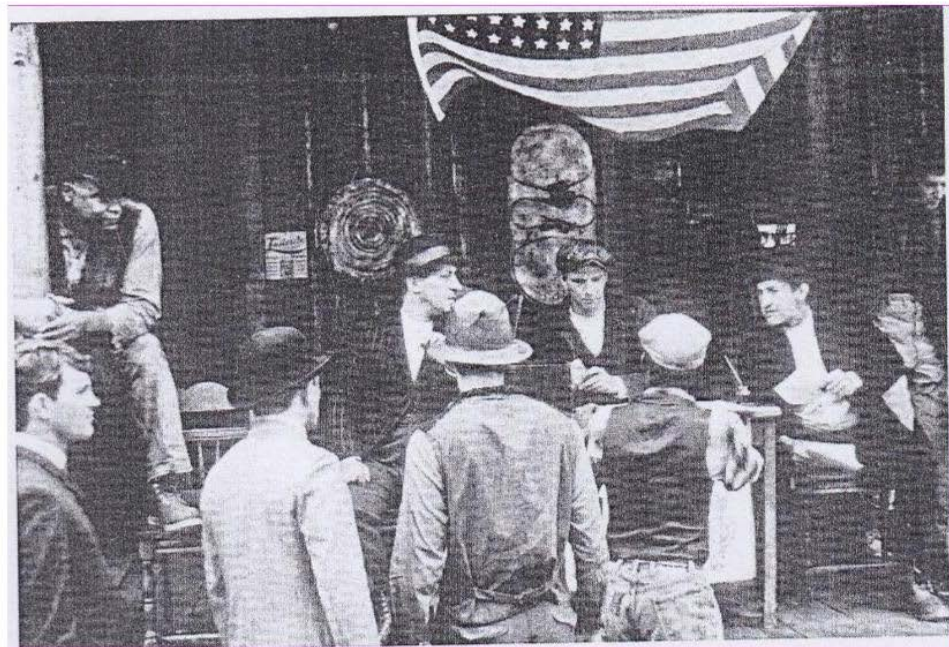


Figure 3. Cinecom. *Fighting for industrial democracy in Matewan*. [Left to right: 'Few Clothes' Johnson; Fausto; Joe Kenehan and Sephus Purcell]. 1987.

The Matewan Massacre in May 1920 resulted in the death of several miners and the brutal suppression of the unions in West Virginia. The federal army was sent into the area several times to maintain order and the coal companies were granted injunctions against the United Mine Workers (UMW). As scholar Doyle Greene describes it, by August 1921 'nothing short of civil war was raging in West Virginia' (Greene: 2010 167). President Harding ended the conflict in September 1921 with military force, including the use of

bombers. The State thus proved itself to be on the side of the mine operators. Greene explains that it

made it abundantly clear it would end the conflict in favor of the coal industry. Following their surrender, over one thousand indictments for conspiracy, murder, and even treason were subsequently brought against the miners who participated in the rebellion. The end result was catastrophe for the UMW; national membership declined from 50,000 in 1920 to a mere 600 by 1929 (Greene: 2010 168).

How did Roosevelt respond to the problems facing Appalachia? The President introduced two major pieces of legislation which affected the region. The TVA, established in May 1933, was aimed specifically at alleviating the economic and environmental problems in the area. This New Deal initiative enjoyed some early successes in its efforts to achieve flood control, improve rural communities and help farmers by linking them to national and international markets. Yet, within two years, innovative projects such as the building of the small, planned town of Norris, Tennessee, the introduction of extension services for farmers, soil conservation, demonstration farms and the planting of trees in areas vulnerable to erosion, had given way to an emphasis on the production and sale of cheap electricity, building hydro-electric dams that flooded many communities, forcing relocation. In this it was “successful,” but, as Paul K. Conkin says, while the TVA did prove ‘the efficiency, flexibility and social concern possible in government-owned, non-profit corporations’, it was nevertheless significant that ‘the residents of the valley never became intimately involved in TVA planning and looked upon it much as an enlightened outside corporation’ (Conkin: 1992 51). It was this lack of involvement of the community in the decisions affecting it that Horton sought to address through his work at the HFS. It also concerned Post, who tried in her photography to portray her subjects as possessing agency, not as either victims or passive recipients of charity. For Post, the TVA was an example of the limited and inadequate reforms within existing social structures which typified the New Deal.

However, it was unionisation that was the major issue, in Appalachia and across the country. Steve Fraser comments that, since World War I, the ‘labor question’ had been ‘not merely the supreme economic question but the constitutive moral, political, and social dilemma of the new social order (Fraser:

1989 55). Legislation introduced during the New Deal meant that for the first time 'government and the law came down firmly on the side of union organisation and a dynamic and militant leadership came to the fore (Badger: 1989 119). By the end of World War II, Fraser argues, 'if the Democratic party was not a mass labor party, it was nonetheless a party resting very much on the labor movement, on the insurgent CIO particularly' (Fraser: 1989 56). Thus, in ensuring the ascendancy of the labor movement, the New Deal had perhaps overseen the resolution of the 'labor question'. Certainly, as Conkin says, 'as a whole, union workers loved and supported Roosevelt while most business leaders reviled him' (Conkin: 1992 65). However, in so doing, the New Deal had 'circumscribed the far horizon of labor's vision' (Fraser: 1989 57).

The National Labor Relations Act was passed in July 1935. Conkin comments that this legislation represented a 'bill of rights for unions', involving as it did 'an almost unbelievable capitulation by the government to union demands' (Conkin: 1992 65). The Act guaranteed the right to collective bargaining by a union chosen by a majority of employees. It also legalised collective action through strikes and boycotts. A code of fair practices outlawed company unions, blacklisting and 'yellow dog' contracts between employers and their employees, who agreed, as a condition of employment, not to become a member of a union. A new National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) was established under the Act. This Board conducted elections requiring employers to participate in collective bargaining and heard complaints from unions. However, the Act did not protect public employees, agricultural workers or workers in intrastate commerce. Nor did it include service workers such as domestic maids and cleaners. This group was excluded also from the work of most of the FSA photographers, with the notable exceptions, as so often, of Post and Gordon Parks (in his well-known series of images of government cleaner Ella Watson, for example). They recognised them as outsiders, in the same way that they also recognised the African Americans as a marginal group which the New Deal was doing little to help. However, as Conkin observes, 'big labor, in one sweep, almost gained equality with big business. But for the majority of workers, as yet unorganized, the Wagner Act was less important than social security' (Conkin: 1992 66). Nowhere was this more accurate than in the Appalachian region. It was this situation that Horton wanted to address by organising labour at the HFS. It was Horton's radical action that Frontier Films

wanted to promote through the activist film *People of the Cumberland*, for which Ralph Steiner invited Post to take the still publicity shots.

When Post travelled to Tennessee in 1937, then, Appalachia remained an isolated region, with a population disproportionately affected by the Depression and assisted in only a limited way by the New Deal. Said's colonial model is a helpful tool with which to interpret the area's continuing problems. Further, while there were also some fundamental differences between the two groups, strong similarities existed between the white Appalachian population and African Americans throughout the US. Both communities were disconnected from mainstream society, cast in the role of the 'other' and received inadequate help from the federal government. This was what Post recognised. As we shall see, becoming involved with activist organisations such as the HFS and Frontier Films would prove a perfect opportunity for a talented young photographer to use her skills in a meaningful way.

'RADICAL POLITICAL ACTION FOR A NEW SOCIAL ORDER': ACTIVISM AND ACTIVIST FILMING IN APPALACHIA

The HFS was established by Horton and West in Monteagle, Tennessee, in 1932. Like Post, Horton 'symbolised a challenge to the South's traditional beliefs and practices' (Boyd: 2015 152). Horton and Post were both activists. They expressed their beliefs and called for action in different ways, but shared several commonalities, both in their early family lives and the intellectual and political influences to which they were exposed as young adults. Rahimi notes that 'from his mother, Horton had learned love and how to avoid mistaking the church for religion' (Rahimi: 2002 347). This echoes what we know of Post's loving relationship with her mother, who also rejected organised religion. Further, Horton's parents and Post's mother shared a belief in the imperative to do something meaningful with one's life; to help others. Both mothers demonstrated their commitment to this belief by being active in their communities, Post's mother through her work as a nurse and then for the Margaret Sanger organisation and Horton's mother as a teacher. Post

and Horton were thus both guided by parents who believed in creating a society based on justice and equality.

Like Post, Horton also became part of a radical social and cultural milieu in his twenties. He was influenced by the theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, whom he met at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. Niebuhr introduced Horton to other socialists in the city, including the philosopher and educational reformer, John Dewey, and would later help raise funds for the school. In a fund-raising letter written in May 1932, Niebuhr explained the HFS committee's aims as

the organization of a Southern Mountains School for the training of labor leaders in the Southern industrial areas. The Southern mountaineers who are being drawn into the coal and textile industries are completely lacking in understanding of the problems of industry and the necessities of labor organization. We believe that neither A F of L [American Federation of Labor] nor Communist leadership is adequate to their needs. Our hope is to train *radical* labor leaders who will understand the need of both political and union strategy (Horton: 1998 61).

Furthermore, Niebuhr concluded, the committee proposed 'to use education as one of the instruments for bringing about a new social order' (Horton: 1998 62). During his time in Chicago, Horton was also taught by the sociologist, Robert Parks. Horton described himself and his circle of friends as 'Depression-era products. We were in that kind of radical period in American history where people were beginning to question the system, where people were beginning to think' (Horton and Freire: 1991 42).

Thayer-Bacon comments that Horton 'wanted to teach people to be social activists' (Thayer-Bacon: 2004 8). Horton sought a restructuring of society, although he later determined that the capitalist system was 'more viable' than he had thought during the Depression, when it seemed to be 'on its last legs' but 'wasn't even limping' and that Roosevelt had succeeded in his aim 'to make it work' (Horton: 1998 81). It is significant that, like Post, Horton's activism presaged the later civil rights movement. His work with the YMCA, shortly after he graduated, for example, included holding a state convention where blacks and whites could meet and eat together, 'before any hint of civil rights movement in the South', as Rahimi observed (Rahimi: 2002 344). Horton's experience of utopian communities taught him that 'you couldn't act

alone, and that you couldn't withdraw into a utopian community. To deal with injustice you had to act in the world' (Rahimi: 2002 345).

Described as a 'radical hillbilly' by Drick Boyd, Horton shared Post's belief in racial equality. He explained in an interview in the early 1970s, 'I am part of the civil rights movement because I am not free ... the role of concerned Whites is to help strengthen Negro leadership, not seek to share leadership' (Boyd: 2015 151). Interestingly, while idealistic, he was nevertheless pragmatic in his understanding that equality was also a means to achieve common ends. This is illustrated in his efforts to educate union leaders, when he

pointed out to CIO leaders that employers would often use their segregationist practice to play Blacks and Whites against each other in order to weaken union efforts to bring actions against them. By contrast, from the beginning Horton insisted that all members were to be treated equally and be given equal opportunity to succeed. He emphasized that a unified front was not only just but effective (Boyd: 2015 146).

Horton was assisted at the HFS by poet and fellow activist, West, whose writing portrayed 'Appalachian people as active agents in their own lives and fortunes as well as inheritors of a rich culture in danger of obliteration' (Lorence: 2007 xv). This links West with Post, who represented African Americans as possessing both a strong culture and the agency to change their lives. Post shared her mother's dislike of organised religion and her exasperation with Christian social workers in Florida is discussed in chapter four. She might have sympathised, however, with West's identification with the social gospel. As explained by James Lorence, 'West worked to apply his own version of Christian humanism in a world populated by too few Christians who understood the need for radical social and economic change' (Lorence: 2007 xiv). James Lorence comments that West's work places him 'squarely in the tradition of American radicalism and demonstrates the power of literature to inspire, when matched with the courageous actions of a socially committed artist as agitator' (Lorence: 2007 xvi). It places him, then, with Post, a courageous activist whose radical photography was powerful and inspirational.

Thus, 'fueled by a belief in Christian socialism, cooperative education, and the richness of Appalachian culture, the partners [Horton and West] now worked to convert a dream into reality' (Lorence: 2007 29). Horton describes

this early period in the history of the school as one when 'there was a lot of radical ferment. The country was in a period of flux, and it was a very creative period in this country, the most creative period I think that I've lived through' (Horton and Freire: 1991 204). The organisation rapidly became 'a major catalyst for social change' (Thayer-Bacon: 2004 9). It soon also became controversial, because, as Rahimi observes, it

defied capitalist education. It taught leadership skills to thousands of blacks and whites in the face of segregation laws and challenged the social, economic and political structures of the segregated South. Highlander worked closely with labor unions, anti-poverty organizations and civil rights leaders and had programs focusing on school desegregation, voter education and civil rights action (Rahimi: 2002 347).

Horton's work with the unions certainly proved controversial. The 1932 strike by miners working for the Fentress Coal and Coke Company in Wilders, Tennessee, resulted in death threats against Horton. The HFS had attempted to provide rations for the starving miners. The eviction of the miners from their homes, together with the death of Barney Graham, the union leader, defeated the strike. The hunting down and shooting of Graham is re-enacted in *People of the Cumberland*, and Post took a still of the scene for Frontier Films.

The work of Horton and West was noticed by another white, radical activist; Eleanor Roosevelt. The First Lady became involved with the HFS, reflecting her commitment to supporting radical activism. Her interest in black housing conditions in Washington, DC is examined in chapter four. In 1938, she also became involved with the HFS, which Horton described as marking 'the beginning of a continuing interest in and support of the work of the school' (Horton: 1989 125).

The HFS would later become active in the civil rights movement, running workshops such as the one attended by Rosa Parks in 1955, where she found out for the first time that 'this could be a unified society, that there was such a thing as people of all races and backgrounds meeting and having workshops and living together in peace and harmony' (Boyd: 2015 140). Furthermore, it was at the HFS that SNCC, discussed in chapter two, was first proposed. At SNCC's founding conference, the new group sang *We Shall Overcome*, which

Zilphia Johnson (later Horton's first wife) had adapted from the traditional hymn. This anthem became the unofficial theme song of the civil rights movement. The historian John Glen notes that 'a significant part of SNCC's inner leadership came from among the student demonstrators who attended the April 1960 workshop' (Glen: 1996 246). These leaders included Marion Barry, John Lewis, Bernard Lafayette and James Bevel. The HFS's connection with SNCC and its photographer Danny Lyon, discussed in chapter two, continued until the closure of the school in 1961.

The school's stance on equality, its involvement with civil rights and the participation of high-profile activists such as Eleanor Roosevelt, clearly mark it out as an activist organisation with radical aims. Perhaps inevitably, then, like the Photo League and the Group Theater, with which Post and several of her Frontier Films colleagues were also involved, the HFS came under the scrutiny of the FBI. Popularly supposed to be a 'communist training school', the organisation was investigated by the FBI. Horton commented later that this was no surprise, because he and his colleagues were 'condemned as agitators or propandandists, the most kindly condemnations, and mostly we were called communists or anarchists or whatever cuss words people could think up at the time' (Horton and Freire: 1991 200). The FBI filed a report on the HFS. A letter to the Director of the FBI from the Knoxville office, dated 4 October 1941, stated that

it has recently come to the attention of this office that Myles Horton, head of the Highlander Folk School, James Dombrowski, secretary of the Highlander Folk School and others affiliated with the school voted for the Communist candidates in the 1936 election. This office is, therefore, extremely desirous that the activities of Myles Horton and the other members of the Highlander Folk School in conducting the school at Memphis be carefully checked at Memphis (FBI: 1941 23-24).

This led to the eventual closure of the school in 1961 (Boyd: 2015 152). However, the school re-opened almost immediately, as the Highlander Research and Education Center, near Knoxville, Tennessee, where it still operates.

Like the HFS, Frontier Films was an activist organisation. It was established in March 1937. It developed from Nykino, an informal splinter group which had broken away from the Photo League at the end of 1934. The new film company also had links with the Group Theater. Its members were thus part of the left-wing cultural milieu with which Post was involved in her early

twenties. It was organised as a collective, which appealed to Post, with her interest in the work of co-operatives. Like the Photo League and the Group Theater - and indeed Post herself - the exact nature of Frontier Films' left-wing politics was debated by critics at the time and later, without any definitive conclusion being reached.² Certainly, it adopted an activist stance on the



Figure 4. Frontier Films. *American doctors and stretcher-bearers at work in Spain*. 1938

Spanish Civil War, as evidenced by the release of *Return to Life* in August 1938. *American doctors and stretcher-bearers at work in Spain* (Figure 4, above) shows a dramatic scene from the film, which was directed by Henri Cartier-Bresson, and was released by Frontier Films for the Medical Bureau and the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. Along with *Heart of Spain* (1937), its other documentary on the civil war, *Return to Life* was created to help fundraising efforts for the US volunteer forces in Spain - volunteers who were officially banned from enlisting by the US government. As Campbell explains, 'from the start it was the intention of Frontier to work in collaboration with other organizations of the Left' (Campbell: 1982 147). The production staff, board of directors and advisory board comprised what Campbell describes as 'a roster of left-of-center cultural talent of the late thirties' (Campbell: 1982 148). The new collective was funded by loans and donations from left-wing sympathisers.

Indeed, like the HFS, Frontier Films was accused of being Communist in character. In the case of Frontier Films, charges were brought by the House of Representatives' Special Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). These charges were found to be inconclusive. Willard van Dyke and Ralph Steiner had both left the organisation because they alleged that it was influenced by the Communist Party, Steiner saying that 'everything had to be approved by the party, everything had to finally conform' (Campbell: 1982 157). However, others such as Leo Hurwitz state that 'if you look at Frontier Films you will see that there is no dictatorship from the outside. We had very little contact with party people' (Campbell: 1982 157). Campbell concludes that 'there is little objective evidence to support or to refute accusations that Frontier Films was under Communist Party sway (Campbell: 1982 157). Whatever the case, the organisation pursued an activist agenda which appealed to a young photographer seeking to use her talents in 'an influential way'.

The group included some well-known personalities, two of whom, Ralph Steiner and Paul Strand, were already known to Post. In his autobiography, *A Point of View* (1978), Steiner describes his involvement with the Group Theater and acknowledges the influence which it had upon his political development. Elaborating on what he thought had shaped his work, Steiner goes on to say he believed that the most important influences on him had been moral, human, and economic. Steiner and Strand had already worked together on *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, described by photographer Willard van Dyke in his introduction to Steiner's autobiography as

one of the most significant nonfiction films ever made ... Steiner and Strand brought all of their great skills to shooting it. The result was strong social comment expressed with artistry and compassion, a work that set high standards for the documentary film (Steiner: 1978 introduction).

Steiner comments in *A Point of View* that he believes the most important elements of a photograph to be the heart and mind of the photographer. This observation could also be a particularly apt description of Post's photography, which reflected very clearly her personal concerns with the issues of race and class. Steiner was a strong influence on the young photographer and the two were to become lifelong friends, as their correspondence in Post's papers at the Center for Creative Photography shows. Post had worked with Ralph Steiner at the Photo League in New York, where she was invited to Steiner's study group, in which she

'participated very seriously and developed a close rapport with Steiner' (AG 114, box 8, file 'Wolcott/Stryker letters I').

Post had clearly impressed Steiner sufficiently for him to invite her to take the still publicity photographs for *People of the Cumberland*, which was being filmed in Tennessee. Post also spent some time with grassroots organisers at the HFS. In an interview with Beverly Brannan, curator of photography at the Library of Congress, in 1986, Post described the film as 'an activist statement about disadvantaged Southern mountaineers' (AG 114, box 2, file 14). The still photographs that Post took to publicise the film also reflected her activism; her desire to use photography 'in an influential way'. As discussed in Chapter One, Leicht (2012) has examined the link between formalism in art and key aspects of democracy, a link which I argue is central to Post's work. I suggest that Post recognised a similar relationship between the aesthetics of *People of the Cumberland* and the activist aims of the members of Frontier Films. This recognition motivated her to bear witness to their work; to evidence their activism

People of the Cumberland (1937), was Frontier Films' first original production. Campbell describes how, 'finally released in May 1938, *People of the Cumberland* was Frontier's first fulfilment of its aim to document "the rich and robust traditions of the American people"' (Campbell: 1982 154). The group had decided early on that 'there can be no effective propaganda without good art' (Alexander: 1975 16). Like Post, then, they were aware of the role played by aesthetics in conveying an activist message. Like Post, also, they were motivated by the need to engage with the audience by defying dehumanising stereotypes and portraying their subjects as fellow humans struggling through difficult living and working conditions. This represented a move away from the film theory of the 1920s, which they believed lacked 'analysis of the effect on the audience' because 'technique and formal problems were supreme. Even people were considered externally, as objects rather than as human beings' (Alexander: 1975 16). To achieve this engagement with the subject, the group intended to produce a film in which 'emotional involvement could be induced through dramatic structure and a realistic and significant rendering of human beings that made viewer identification possible' (Alexander: 1975 17). Alexander observes of Paul Strand that, 'a concern, then, for high art, communication and effect, Strand, a

determined artist, both brought to Nykino and found there' (Alexander: 1975 18). We may say the same of Post, who also reached out to engage with her audience, making it one with her, in the same way as the members of Frontier Films sought to 'engage the audience fully, hearts and minds, making them one with the film makers in experience and outlook' (Alexander: 1975 25).

Frontier Films chose a dialectical structure to enable this viewer identification. The result, according to Myers, was 'a film that demands absolute and even strained participation, but afterward we feel rewarded by a fuller capacity to view and understand life in its wholeness' (Alexander: 1975 20). The effort of looking at Post's images can also be an emotional strain, because of their subject matter and because of her deliberate effort to make an emotional appeal to the viewer, but is similarly rewarding. Like her film colleagues, Post's work demonstrated 'realistic and dignified treatment of human beings ... involvement and activation of the viewer, a specific, committed social-economic-political stance, and a wise, mature, integrated world view' (Alexander: 1975 20).

This dialectical structure also reflected the influence of Soviet film. Thus, the thesis, or status quo, is challenged by the antithesis, or opposing force of the working class, represented in this film by the HFS. This ultimately brings about a synthesis, or new order. Frontier Films used a technique known as 'synthetic documentary' to explain this to the viewer. This involved the use of both documentary footage and dramatic re-enactment of scenes such as the murder of the union leader in Figure 5, discussed below. Patrick D. Hundley argues that 'this offers two levels of viewing – the actual level for fragments of historical reality and the staged level for impressions of the historical experience' (Hundley: 1976 58). However, as with documentary photography, this film technique does not distort the narrative played out to the viewer; rather, it is a means of enhancing the emotional effect, particularly in scenes such as the murder of the union leader which clearly could not be original footage.

Whereas Post considered *People of the Cumberland* 'an activist statement' - a project with which she proudly was aligned - then her photographs seem to recognise the project's shortcomings and, at least partially, help to undo them. For, despite the film's call for a radical restructuring of society, it has been

criticised for three apparent failings. First, as Fishbein rightly says, African Americans are conspicuous by their absence, despite integration being one of the central tenets of the HFS philosophy. Indeed, it is true that - as in much of the photography taken by Post's colleagues in the FSA - the film tries to persuade us that

all of the victims of poverty are white: sturdy and stoic when old, innocent and piteous when young. In fact, from its very inception in 1932 the Highlander Folk School stood athwart Southern traditions of racism and worked steadily toward the goal of integration (Fishbein: 1984 567).

This omission is particularly glaring in the scenes portraying unionisation efforts. As Fishbein, again correctly, observes, 'during the 1930s Highlander worked diligently to integrate the trade union movement in order to thwart attempts by Southern capitalists to pit blacks against whites in order to keep wages low' (Fishbein: 1984 568). Fishbein argues that 'despite the impressive record of work on behalf of labor integration by Horton and Highlander, *People of the Cumberland* depicts only whites presumably of native stock, as being the beneficiaries of unionisation' (Fishbein: 1984 569). Interestingly, Fishbein makes a further observation, that 'by ignoring altogether issues of race and ethnicity, the film may render Southern unionisation palatable to a wider audience, but it undercuts much of Highlander's contribution to integrating and democratizing the labor movement' (Fishbein: 1984 570). This recalls comments made by revisionist historians of the FSA, who have argued that Stryker's concern with FSA photographs reaching a wide audience led to an overly cautious policy about which subjects were deemed acceptable to photograph and publish. This was reflected in the conservative nature of many of the images created by Post's colleagues. It also, as we have seen, meant that Post stood apart from her colleagues by insisting on exploring issues which she clearly felt were of importance both personally and nationally. Her integrity and her courageous approach did mean, however, that many of her most important images were not published at the time when they were needed.

Second, Fishbein argues that the film suggests that the HFS adopted a paternalistic attitude towards community problem solving. He feels that the film is therefore guilty of betraying the HFS's concern with enabling the local community to find its own solutions to the problems it faced. This is because

‘instead of emphasizing the ingenuity of the adult poor, the film dwells on the plasticity of the young and the paternalistic role of the Highlander Folk School’ (Fishbein: 1984 570).

Finally, and related to his second point, Fishbein argues that the role of the Government and the New Deal are inaccurately interpreted. Fishbein is critical of what he sees as the film’s focus on the Roosevelt Administration, which he argues views the federal government as supportive of unionisation, despite it having an uneven record in the local area; ‘surely the school staff had no illusions regarding the benevolence of government and instead relied upon worker initiatives to obtain whatever scant gains it could for labor in Grundy County’ (Fishbein: 1984 572). Furthermore, Fishbein argues that the TVA is portrayed as an essential part of the final synthesis, ‘although it owed its existence to neither the Highlander nor the unions but instead was a product of governmental benevolence’ (Fishbein: 1984 574). However, I suggest that William Alexander more accurately interprets the film-makers’ aims. Alexander believes the film reflects its makers’ activist beliefs, saying that

we are told that TVA is “a good beginning, but only a beginning”. And in the film’s concluding moments, both commentary and images reaffirm the crucial importance of unions to continued advancement in the Cumberland’ (Alexander: 1975 22).

Fishbein argues that the radicalising impact of the film upon the audience is undermined by the film’s inability to

choose between two philosophies of education: one essentially paternalistic and the other activist and between two modes of persuasion: a reformist one evoking audience sympathy for the victims of capitalist greed in the Cumberland, thereby fostering the belief that the government and Highlander can alleviate their misery, and a radical one demanding that the mountaineers themselves (as well as the audience) participate actively in the class struggle (Fishbein: 1984 576).

However, Alexander concludes, I suggest more perceptively, that ‘an ongoing dialectic, a tension in the synthesis, challenges the viewer to continue the struggle’ (Alexander: 1975 22). I argue, like Alexander, for a radical, activist reading of the film. Further, from what we know of Post’s political beliefs and motivations, it seems highly unlikely that she would have wished to be involved with work which merely served to praise the uneven efforts of the

New Deal government, just as she would soon strain against the limits of its high-profile agency the FSA.

As explained above, in 1937 Post took a series of 31 (uncaptioned) photographs to publicise *People of the Cumberland*. While this project has been briefly referred to by several scholars, the images themselves, which are held at MoMA in New York, do not appear to have been analysed in the literature. It is useful therefore to analyse the series and to examine selected images in detail. I have selected three images that I believe best represent Post's interests and aims in this series; to show how unions were being suppressed in Appalachia and the impact of this on family life. Figures 5, 6 and 7 demonstrate Post's politics and aesthetic sensibility forming, before she joined the FSA the following year. Figures 5 and 7 are early examples of Post's desire to deliberately shock the viewer into action. Figure 6 is significant because of Post's early use of the symbolism of the flag, as discussed below.

The first question which arises in connection with this series is how much freedom Post had in her choice of subjects and in the message she wished to convey in these images. It is probable that she had to adhere to a formal script following the requirements of the film company. However, it is conceivable that she could act to at least some extent on her own initiative, as she was to do later at the FSA. If so, this would explain the balance of subjects in this series, which is evenly distributed between images of unionisation and family life. There are ten images of both subjects in the series, together with a further four depicting scenes of community life. Post was interested in children and demonstrated a strong empathy with them. As we can see from her FSA photographs, she succeeded in gaining their parents' trust, which enabled her to take photographs in family homes. I suggest that the images of both unionisation and family and community life in this file reflect Post's own personal interest in these subjects.



Figure 5. Marion Post. [Re-enactment of the murder of union organiser Barney Graham in 1932]. Tennessee. 1937.

Post's portrayal in Figure 5 (below), of a union leader being pursued and shot echoes the massacre in Matewan. More importantly, it is a re-enactment of the killing of local union organiser Barney Graham, following the Wilder strike of 1932. As she was to do later, particularly in her photograph of the black man entering a movie theatre, Post makes effective use of shadow in this image. The man on the left of the frame holds a gun, but we see only its shadow, rather than the weapon. This creates a more menacing tone in the image, especially since the shadow of the object may be larger than the object itself. The focus of the image is the dark space in the centre, into which the escaping man has presumably fled, but is running, the darkness suggests, into oblivion. The two men are dressed alike and we do not see their faces; this further reinforces the sense of threat in the image. The men are representatives of the mine company and anonymous bringers of death. Significantly, union organizer Graham is depicted not as an aggressor, not as an imminent threat to the company's private policeman. Quite the contrary, his back is to the viewer—and to the armed man. Even so, as the framing suggests, the man will fire on Graham, killing the non-violent and presumably unarmed organiser.

Similarly, Post's composition in Figure 6 (below), uses her emerging technique of visual juxtaposition to forward radical ideological aims. While her main subjects clearly are the marching miners, who proceed from upper left to lower right, ever larger, the US flag occupies the top centre of the image, as if endorsing these efforts for workplace democracy. It is unclear whether this image was documentary footage or a re-enactment. If the latter, it is possible that the HFS, which was under FBI scrutiny for alleged Communist Party connections, encouraged the men to include the flag as a reassurance to viewers that the men were not members of the Party. I suggest, however, that this was probably documentary footage and that it was the flag's positive symbolic properties which were of interest to the miners and to Post. The flag was, of course, revolutionary in origin. Henry Miller observed that

we have two American flags always: one for the rich and one for the poor. When the rich fly it it means that things are under control; when the poor fly it it means danger, revolution, anarchy (Testi: 2010 v).

The flag became increasingly associated with ideas of conflict and freedom and with social and political issues throughout history. This included its role both in the civil rights movement and in the labor movement. Indeed, as Testi comments,

since the beginning of industrialization and the explosion of the Social Question, the Red Flag was marginalized and industrial workers asserted their rights, mainly, by flying the Stars and Stripes ... a truly American peculiarity (Testi: 2010 10-11).

Indeed, the flag – like documentary photographs – may be said to be polysemous. As Testi, quoting the US Supreme Court in *Spence v Washington* (1974), summarises it, 'it might be said that we all draw something from our national symbol, for it is capable of conveying simultaneously a spectrum of images' (Testi: 2010 v).



Figure 6. Marion Post. [*UMW march*] Tennessee. 1937.

Post was acutely aware of the power of symbolism to convey her message about the need for action to create a democratic ideal. It was part of her aesthetic strategy; her use of formalism to fuse form and content, as discussed in Chapter One.

She would make use later of irony in her juxtaposition of poor black alley dwellings against backdrops of iconic statuary and federal government buildings. Here, however, I suggest that Post emphasises the US flag in the centre of the image without irony and would have been aware of the association of the flag with political movements. This iconic item becomes an additional focal point in the photograph. It is carried upright and is higher than the miners' placard, suggesting that they, too, include this element as a positive part of their protest. Post was aware of the flag's symbolic connotations, especially given the fact that *The Star-Spangled Banner* had been officially adopted as the US national anthem in 1931. The colours red, white and blue had traditionally been associated in the flag with the qualities of valour and bravery; purity and innocence; and vigilance, perseverance and justice, respectively. The shapes on the flag are also significant. In addition to representing the 50 states of the Union, the stars are symbols of heaven,

traditionally seen as the divine goal of men. Perhaps most significantly in this context, the stripes have been interpreted as rays of light from the sun; representing a new dawn, or a new beginning. I therefore suggest that the miners displayed the flag prominently partly to make clear their patriotism, but mainly their bravery and their perseverance in the pursuit of the new dawn which will break with the arrival of economic justice. When that day arrives, they will finally share the liberty, freedom and human rights traditionally associated with the flag.

As discussed above, it is unclear how much control Post had over the types of images she created for this series. However, the next image (Figure 7, below) unambiguously demonstrates Post's central concern with people. Her subjects here are presented in squalid surroundings, yet it is undeniably the family which she considers most important. This appears to be a close group. The mother is busy cooking, but is also engaging with her younger son, who appears to be about to ask a question and at whom she half-smiles. Meanwhile, his elder brother, while physically slightly apart, appears to be listening to the conversation between his mother and his sibling. As she did in her photographs of Washington, DC and Florida, discussed in chapter four, Post is concerned to show the conditions in which the marginalised members of society lived, to make clear her desire to improve substandard housing, not only hazardous working conditions. Thus, while Post implies that this perhaps one-room dwelling is the mother's workplace as both cook and childrearer, Post's additional aim is to show the viewer the need for unionisation in the Cumberland, among the male mining workforce.

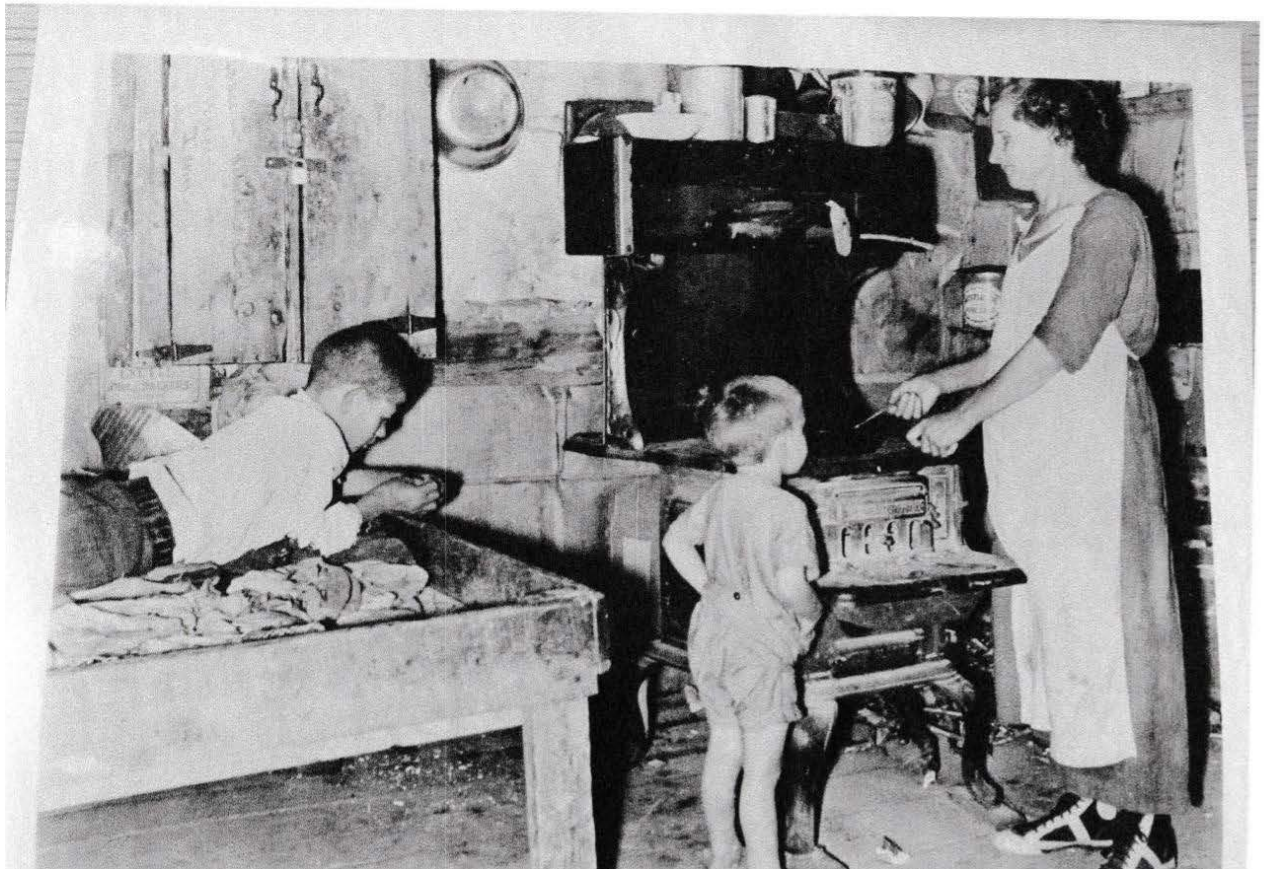


Figure 7. Marion Post. [*A Cumberland family*]. Tennessee. 1937.

As in Figures 5 and 6, the lack of any caption here means that we do not have Post's characteristically informative interpretation of the scene. It is therefore unclear, for example, whether this is a mining or an agricultural family. I suggest it is a mining family. The father is absent, perhaps at work or attending union business. Despite this omission, I argue that this image is a further example of Post's activism. Her composition clearly suggests that this family is struggling, yet closely-knit. It represents other families in the region, whose lives have been blighted by uncontrolled capitalism; a system in which the workers have had no union voice and in which union action is both justified and necessary.

In this image, as in the others in this series, I suggest that Post shows her empathy with her subjects. In this image, as elsewhere in her work, Post is physically close to her subjects. Here, she has entered their domestic space, indicating trust on both sides. Post usually writes detailed captions for her work, which provide the viewer both with important factual information and with a clear indication of Post's empathy with her subject. As discussed above, none of the photographs in this series is captioned. This may simply reflect Frontier

Films' policy. Alternatively, it may, in common with other examples of her work, reflect a deliberate strategy by Post to allow her image to speak for itself. Post also shows her desire for radical action to bring about a restructuring of society. As we have seen, Post shared her views on social justice with members of the HFS and Frontier Films, the activist organisations with which she was involved during this project. I further suggest that Post's concerns with civil rights were particularly closely aligned with those of Horton. Both were not merely ahead of their time, but prepared to act on their beliefs, thus presaging the work of the formal civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, their work laid some of its foundations.

'WE WATCH THE SCABS GO BY': STRIKERS AND A PHOTOGRAPHER ON THE PICKET LINE

People of the Cumberland was playing at the Cameo Theatre in New York when Strand wrote to Stryker in June 1938, describing Post in his letter of introduction as

a young photographer of considerable experience who has made a number of very good photographs on social themes in the South and elsewhere. Incidentally, the stills for our recently released film, 'People of the Cumberland', were made by her. I feel that if you have any place for a conscientious and talented photographer, you will do well to give her an opportunity (AG 114, box 8, file 'Wolcott/Stryker letters I').

Post was at this time employed as a news photographer at the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, work she described as 'an invaluable experience' which developed her confidence in her photography and her ability to work with others in an organisation. Nevertheless, she soon became restless, 'feeling that [she] was getting into sort of a rut – that this kind of news photography was essentially and unavoidably superficial, and that [she] had had an overdose of fashions and society' (AG 114, box 7, file 'Lecture material III'). Post wanted an opportunity to use photography in a more meaningful way. Her first assignment for the FSA was in West Virginia, where she travelled in September 1938, moving on to Tennessee the following year. I suggest that Post's desire to use her photography as an activist medium is evidenced both by her close identification with her subjects in Figures 8, 9 and 10 and by her captions.

Post has taken *Mexican miner and child, Bertha Hill, West Virginia* (1938) (Figure 8, below), from the close range which is characteristic of her images of people with whom she strongly identified. As elsewhere, this is also indicative of the trust she inspired in her subjects. The man returns Post's gaze directly and appears relaxed and half-smiling in her presence. As discussed above, Post had a particular interest in children and family life. Her sensitivity meant that parents trusted her sufficiently to allow her to take photographs of their children. She includes here the man's young daughter, who appears small and vulnerable. Her clothes are old and worn and her coat is torn. As with the images of families that Post took for Frontier Films, I suggest that this image can be interpreted as an activist statement by Post, which she intended to highlight the impact of the socio-economic conditions within the mining community on families, both white and non-white.



Figure 8. Marion Post. *Mexican miner and child, Bertha Hill, West Virginia*. Many Mexicans and Negroes were brought in to Scotts Run around 1926 to break the strike. Now about one fourth of all mines employ any at all and these, only very small percent and 'only the cream'. They are generally accepted by other folks and there is a good deal of mixing and intermarriage.

Bertha Hill, West Virginia. September 1938.

Post's caption is typically detailed and informative. She explains that this

Mexican miner was perhaps one of those brought to Scotts Run to break the 1926 strike. It is notable that she uses the term 'Negroes', demonstrating her understanding that this was the term then preferred by African Americans and thus implicitly identifying herself with them. Post is careful also to point out that, once having been used to the advantage of the coal operators, these miners were subsequently only employed by around one quarter of the companies. She demonstrates an awareness, too, of the issue of racial difference in the mines, in her comment at the end of the caption, that the Mexicans and African Americans are 'generally accepted by other folks'. I propose that, like Joe Kenehan, the union organiser in *Matewan*, Post believes that cultural difference need not be a barrier to unity. Here, as in *Matewan*, the miners' socio-economic class bound them together more than race or ethnicity divided them. Joe Kenehan was a fictional character in the film, but was based upon Eugene Debs, one of the founders of the radical trade union the IWW. When it was established in 1905, the IWW was the only union to welcome immigrants and African Americans, arguing for cross-racial working-class solidarity. I therefore suggest that Post's identification with Kenehan's sentiments marks her as a radical activist, whose views on race were similar to those of the IWW. Indeed, Post's focus here upon a non-white immigrant worker and the child who must survive on his earnings broadens the scope of FSA representations of suffering during the Depression, looking across generational lines and beyond the putative black-white binary in the South.

Post explores the issue of unionisation further in *Picketing. Copper miners on strike waiting for scabs to come out of mines* (1939) (Figure 9, below). Her composition in this image is interesting. The striking miners form the focal point of the image. They appear isolated and rather vulnerable. They sit close to their car, whose doors remain open, perhaps indicating anxiety about the return of company henchmen or a desire to pursue and harass the 'scabs' from the mine. As always, Post's main concern is with her human subjects. Nevertheless, their placard is a significant part of the image, mainly because its use of the term 'scabs' is shocking, as discussed below.

The men's isolation is emphasised by the vast expanse of sky which is the backdrop to the image, and by the arid foreground. It is not clear whether this is one of several groups of strikers, who are nearby but do not form part of the image, or whether the men are alone in what appears to be an inhospitable

landscape. Post succeeds in creating an image which conveys her identification with this group of activists and their message. The viewer is left in no doubt that while Post is observing this scene from the other side of the camera, this activist photographer is both emotionally and intellectually on the picket line, showing her solidarity with the striking men.



Figure 9. Marion Post. *Picketing. Copper miners on strike waiting for scabs to come out of mines.* Ducktown, Tennessee. September 1939.

Post's caption is simple and direct. Her use of the slang term 'scabs' to describe strike-breakers reflects its use by the miners in their placard and thus indicates the photographer's strong identification with them. However, Post

could also empathise with Mexicans brought in to break the strike, because they were being used solely for that purpose by the mining companies – who dispensed with them once they were no longer of use. In Figure 9, Post's use of this terminology is very significant. Like her use of the term 'Negro' in her images of African Americans, it suggests her empathy with her immediate subjects, adopting their language and joining them in an activist argument about the harmful—if ultimately untenable—position of strike-breakers.

'Scab' is an emotionally charged slang word which is similar to 'blackleg' in the way it is used to denote strike-breakers. It is a derogatory term which implies sickness, here not the physical disfiguration of a human body, but the moral disfiguration of the social body of labour. Its use as a pejorative term for strike-breakers can be traced back to the Elizabethan era in England and was well established in the United States by 1806. Jack London spoke on the subject to the Oakland Socialist Party in April 1903. The following year, he defined a strike-breaker as 'a traitor to his God, his country, his family and his class!' (IWW website).

The larger group of strikers in another image - with the same title, *Copper miners on strike waiting for scabs to come out of mines* (1939) - (Figure 10, below), appears much more relaxed and confident. They all face the viewer directly, indicating their willingness to be photographed and suggesting that Post has, characteristically, spoken to them and gained their trust before creating her image. It seems likely that she explained to them that she identified with their cause and wished to use this photograph to gain support for it. This is also suggested by the close range which Post once again enjoys. In any case, it is impressive that this large group of working-class men, in the middle of industrial action, was apparently happy to be photographed by a young, middle-class, northern woman. We see two boys in the foreground. They have presumably accompanied their fathers to the picket line and indeed were perhaps already working alongside them in the mines. Their presence here possibly indicates that violence was not anticipated. On the other hand, the squatting man, foreground centre, wields a large stick, suggesting the potential for violence in any encounter between striking workers and strike-breakers. As in the previous image, Post may have felt, I believe correctly, that her empathy with the striking miners, and her wish that her image should be interpreted as a call to solidarity, required no further elaboration.



Figure 10. Marion Post. *Copper miners on strike waiting for scabs to come out of mines. Ducktown, Tennessee. September 1939.*

Post's return to Appalachia for her first assignment for the FSA enabled her to develop her interest in unionisation and strike action. She championed workplace democracy, clearly siding with striking workers in their struggles with bosses, even as she further sympathized with non-white strike-breakers and their children. As she had done for Frontier Films a year earlier, Post demonstrated her concern with the effects of miners' poor pay and working conditions upon family life. Her images also illustrate her recognition of the power of aesthetics and symbolism to convey her concerns and her desire for action. Her use of captions to help us interpret her images is also evident in this early work.

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People in Appalachia in the mid-1930s had clearly been badly affected by the Depression. As elsewhere, African Americans were disproportionately affected, as were other non-white workers. Here, too, the New Deal had not fully addressed either their economic problems or the more fundamental issue of civil rights. The region was therefore in need of radical action. It required the activist approach demonstrated both by organisations and individuals such as Post.

Efforts by the activist organisation the HFS to bring about radical change in Appalachia and the filming of this action by the activist film company, Frontier Films, afforded the perfect environment for an idealistic young activist photographer to use her developing talents in 'an influential way'. Post's work for Frontier Films demonstrates the coming together of the influences upon her as a child and as a young woman together with the opportunity provided by Frontier Films to develop her skills as an activist photographer. Her work in Appalachia prepared her for what was to be her role as an anomalous member of the FSA, one who spoke out courageously about racial and economic injustice in society.

As my heading for section three suggests, I argue that Post identified so strongly with the cause the men she photographed represented, that she became almost part of their picket line. Though it's unlikely that she fully lived among them—perhaps sleeping somewhere comfortable with plenty of food at the end of every day--she nonetheless was far removed from FSA colleagues, who made documentary records, with the aim of bringing about limited reform. She was here, as elsewhere in her work, ideologically at one with, and fighting for, her subjects.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘LIKE DEAD AND LIVING BODIES CHAINED TOGETHER’: IMAGES OF POVERTY AND AFFLUENCE

Post felt, like political activist Thomas Paine, that ‘the contrast of affluence and wretchedness continually meeting and offending the eye is like dead and living bodies chained together’ (Kuklick: 2000 332). She believed that portraying the disparities between the wealthy and the poor in society highlighted the problems of the latter in a way that simply showing the poor failed to do. This chapter will explore Post’s use of juxtaposition and contrast in her photography to advance highly politicised positions. As we have seen, Post was determined to explore issues of race and class avoided by most of her FSA colleagues. These include the lives of African Americans, examined in chapter two and the unionisation of labour, discussed in chapter three. She was anomalous also in her interest in the portrayal of the wealthy in the Depression. She understood that the wealthy were partly responsible for the economic and social problems of the 1930s. I shall examine two series of Post’s photographs that demonstrate her radical, activist point of view and that show how she uses aesthetics in her imagery to help convey her beliefs and to strengthen her appeal to the reader to take action.

As I have established in earlier chapters, Post stood apart from most of her white, liberal male FSA colleagues. I shall begin this chapter by examining selected photographs taken by FSA photographers in Washington, DC. I argue that these images demonstrate that the mainstream FSA photographers were motivated by a wish to see limited social reform within existing structures. This is evidenced by their choice of subjects, their conventional aesthetics and their captions. I shall also discuss the ways in which Post’s images reveal both her radical, activist point of view and the aesthetic and formal means she employed to convey her message about the need she perceived for radical social restructuring. In section two, I shall discuss the series of images that Post took in Washington, DC. These include an early example of her work taken in September 1938, shortly after her appointment to the FSA. Section three is concerned with the ‘good contrast material’ Post found in Florida, where wealthy residents and tourists lived in luxury only twenty miles from migrant labourers.

‘YOU HAVE TO LEARN TO APPRECIATE JUXTAPOSITIONS’: A RADICAL RESPONSE AND A RADICAL REPRESENTATION

It is useful to begin by briefly considering some of the photographs of Washington, DC taken by Post’s colleagues. These images help to place Post as an activist photographer with a particular concern with the civil rights of African Americans. The first of these, *In front of Union Station, Washington, DC*, (1939) (Figure 1, below), was taken by John Vachon, shortly after his arrival in what he described as ‘a pleasant, somnolent city’ (AG 114 box 6 file 2). Like Post, Vachon was taking his first photographs in the city. This image includes African American subjects, together with four federal buildings and monuments which were of interest to Post. Post drew together these human and architectural elements in what I believe is a unique combination. The effect is powerful and reflects her aims as an activist photographer. However, Vachon seems unaware of the significance of these structures. For example, the photograph has been taken from an angle in which the flagpole interrupts the view of the Senate building. He takes his photograph with his back to Union Station, itself an iconic building, looking towards the Columbus Monument, the Russell Senate Office and the Capitol. These four architectural elements are linked in a straight line by the Delaware Avenue. They are examples of the neoclassical architecture which became popular during the American Renaissance and they are rich in symbolism, as I shall discuss below in relation to Post’s images of them.

Vachon’s composition in this image also suggests that he is unaware of, or relatively unconcerned with, the significance of the group of black figures standing close to the Columbus Monument, with the white government buildings in the background. While Post habitually stood close to her subjects, particularly those with whom she felt strong empathy, there is some distance here between Vachon and his subjects, with whom he does not appear to have made contact.



Figure 1. John Vachon. *In Front of Union Station, Washington, DC*. September 1939.

This detachment is reflected in Vachon's caption, which is brief and uninformative. It tells the reader only the location and date of the photograph. The main subject of the image might appear to be the group of African American travellers, but they are not mentioned in the caption. This omission is particularly odd given that the members of the group appear middle-class and well-dressed, and are perhaps waiting at the crosswalk to enter Union Station to board a train. The image is thus not typical. This may have been the reason Vachon took it. If so, the reader is left without any commentary from the photographer on what was probably an unusual scene, at a time when the majority of black Washingtonians were living in poverty, many of them in the alley dwellings which were the subject of Post's photographs in the capital.

Like Vachon, Carl Mydans takes his photograph, *Slums*, (Figure 2, below), from a distance. The angle of the shot also suggests that he was situated above the men in the street, looking down upon, not across at, his subjects.



Figure 2. Carl Mydans. *Slums*. Washington, DC. November 1935.

Mydans does not name this street. His one-word caption uses the pejorative term 'slums', rather than 'alley dwellings', the expression preferred by reform groups such as the Washington Housing Association, with which Eleanor Roosevelt was associated. The caption also suggests that it was the buildings which were of most interest to the photographer, rather than the people. As in Vachon's image, there is no suggestion in the caption that the photographer had made any contact with the people in his image. It is interesting to compare the caption for this photograph with another in Mydans' series on housing in Washington, taken in November 1935, which is entitled *View of 'blight'*. *This fine old brick dwelling is now a shambles housing Negro families on relief* and which is notable for its use of the derogatory words 'blight' and 'shambles'. As I shall explore in this chapter, Post's captions, by contrast, emphasise the people who were the principal subjects of her images. It is also clear from the details she provides that she has made contact with her subjects and spent time eliciting information about their lives from them.

It is interesting also to compare Post's work with that of photographer Berenice Abbott, who was employed by another New Deal agency, the Federal Arts Project. *Changing New York*, a series of images taken in 1935-36, includes *Henry Street, 29 November 1935*. This photograph is visually striking and similar in composition to the images which Post would take in Washington.

It shows a row of tenement houses in the foreground, overshadowed by skyscrapers in the background. However, the function of the skyscrapers is not immediately obvious to the reader, unlike the easily recognisable, iconic federal government buildings in Post's images. They could contain expensive apartments, which Abbott wanted to contrast with the poor housing below, but could equally be offices. Abbott's caption provides no clues for the reader, who is therefore left unclear exactly how to read this image. As we shall see, Post, by contrast, has an unambiguous message for us in her images; she is an activist photographer, with strong didactic aims. Her images, here, as elsewhere, work upon the viewer in two ways. First, to raise the viewer's consciousness of issues of social injustice. Second, as a call for radical action to abolish this injustice. She wishes to convey her desire for social justice, which she believes requires a radical restructuring of society. She conveys this message through her use of the aesthetic strategies discussed in Chapter One.

While Abbott's work in New York was similar to Post's because it was formally striking, neither Vachon nor Mydans created images which had the same aesthetic impact as Post's photographs. In Post's work, the formal qualities of composition and use of contrast help convey her ideological message. Post uses the formal techniques of contrast and juxtaposition within photographs in this series. I argue that she intends to illustrate the discrepancy between the dystopian reality of life for African Americans in the Deep South and the democratic ideal to which she aspires - and in search for which she urges her viewers to take action. It is thus democratic art, in the sense that Leicht explains it, as discussed in Chapter One. Post's images, then, are 'recipes for social action' (Leicht: 2012 12).

Her images thus have a greater impact upon the reader. This reflects the difference in point of view and motivation between the mainstream FSA photographers and Post. Thus, I believe that the images discussed above show that Post's colleagues adhered to the liberal New Deal ideology, which sought reform, but did not advocate fundamental change in society. Post's images, by contrast, convey her radical point of view and her strong desire as an activist photographer to persuade the reader to seek the type of societal change which most FSA photographers would have felt too politically radical.

As discussed in chapter one, Martha Rosler's critique of liberal humanist documentary suggests that photographers such as the FSA group were arguing for limited reform within existing social structures, rather than for radical change in society. John Tagg argued similarly that FSA photographs should be read in the context of the limited structural reform proposed by the New Deal. As I have suggested, this is not a helpful interpretive model for analysing Post's images, since her position was so far outside the mainstream FSA. It can, however, be applied appropriately to the work of her colleagues. Thus, Vachon's and Mydans' images derive their meaning from what we know about the New Deal and the FSA, while Post's images are most usefully interpreted through what we know about her personal and political concerns, as suggested by John Berger. Berger emphasises the importance of the artist's individual vision; what he describes as the artist's 'way of seeing'. This is the most fruitful way to explore Post's work.

The photographer's use of captions is clearly also important. As discussed in chapter one, semioticians such as Barthes believed that the caption serves two important functions. In both the images above, the captions fulfil what Barthes described as their denoted, or literal, role, contextualising the image by supplying the reader with information about the location and date of the photograph. However, Barthes suggests that since all images are polysemous, the caption should therefore also serve a connotative function which enables the reader to interpret the photograph. Neither Vachon's nor Mydans' captions do this - or do so only in narrow prescriptive ways, with reference to buildings. While Post's detailed captions leave the reader in no doubt about her close identification with her African American subjects and her desire to change society, Vachon's and Mydans' captions do not make clear their feelings towards their human subjects.

Significant differences thus clearly existed between Post and the majority of her colleagues. Although he arrived at the FSA after Post had departed, black photographer Gordon Parks was perhaps the member of the group whose politics and photographic style most closely resembled that of Post. Parks was an activist photographer who described how he used his camera to reveal and fight against the conditions of African American life in the capital. He spoke of his camera as a weapon 'to speak against anything we disliked in the world of fact' (Willis: 1996 177). I argue that Post likewise saw

her camera as a means of expressing her response to the effects of the Depression. Her radical response was reflected in her radical mode of representation, which included her use of contrast and juxtaposition. Post clearly believed, like photographer Frederick Sommer, that

you have to learn to appreciate juxtapositions, a set of things, a constellation of things in a way that you just happen to meet; you have to be flexible enough to see the possibilities (AG 114: box 7 Lecture Material IV).

CORRIDORS OF POWER AND ALLEYS OF DEPRIVATION: WHITE GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS AND BLACK WORKER HOUSING IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL

The Depression reinforced the inequalities and discrimination already faced by African Americans living in the nation's capital. A photograph in the *Washington Post* on 9 August 1925 shows members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) marching down Pennsylvania Avenue, with the Capitol dome in the background. The caption, 'Bearing huge American flags, 400 members of the local klavern of the KKK led the parade yesterday', describes what the newspaper calls 'one of the greatest parades Washington has ever witnessed' (*Washington Post*: 9 August 1925 5). The KKK had been revived in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1915. Historian Adam Fairclough explains how it had then 'gained millions of members in the cities and states of the North' (Fairclough: 2002 125). Manning Marable notes that 'by 1925 the Ku Klux Klan had reached the zenith of its influence' and that this march 'demonstrated the strong institutional influence of vigilantism and white supremacy in American politics' (Marable: 2002 127). Almost 40,000 KKK members participated in the march. The Capitol dome thus served as a backdrop to the KKK march. The symbolism of the Capitol dome and Senate office buildings would similarly feature in Post's images of Washington, DC in the 1930s, where these white government buildings again formed the background to black suffering. In this section, I shall examine the way Post juxtaposed iconic monuments and 'the most recognisable and powerful government buildings in the nation' with poor black housing (Siamopoulos: 2016 213). I believe she did this to make both an unambiguous statement about her response to the lives of African Americans in the capital

and an appeal for action from the viewer. Selected images (Figures 3-5, below), exemplify this. I argue that Post was unique in the FSA in this use of contrast within her images to reinforce her radical political message.

When Post created *Tourists arriving at Washington, DC. Throwing pennies to colored boys in fountain across from Union Station*, her image of black boys near the Columbus Monument in September 1938 (Figure 3, below), African Americans formed around 25% of the population of the nation's capital. Washington had experienced waves of black migration since the mid-nineteenth century. The hostile white response led to the segregated alley communities, which became known to some as the 'secret city'. African American migration to northern cities had tended to result in black 'ghettoes' developing in single sections of the cities, as a result of whites-only restrictive zoning and racial covenants. However, in Washington, as in many Southern and border cities, the incoming population had settled in 'mini-ghettoes' across the city: a checkerboard pattern. In Washington, these were 'often in close proximity to the most expensive and elegant houses' (Borchert: 1982 2). Historian Blanche Wiesen Cook describes how,

behind beautiful Georgian facades, high walls, and well-trimmed privets, Washington kept its long-neglected secrets: over two hundred ugly, crowded, festering hidden alleyways that had aroused protest for decades (Cook: 2000 156).

Borchert explains that 'the white response to that migration, and the resulting residential pattern, set the context in which alley houses flourished' (Borchert: 1982 2). These alley communities were often close, also, to the symbolic white buildings of white government. It was this juxtaposition that was of interest to Post.

It was also noted by other photographers. For example, Godfrey Frankel spoke of his 'shock upon arriving in Washington in 1943 and observing the city's alley dwellings for the first time, explaining that

Cleveland had plenty of substandard housing, deprivation, and poverty. But Washington dwellings were different. They compacted the oppressed population into rows of buildings sandwiched between streets of better housing with regular sidewalks, curbs, trees, and lawns (Goldstein: 1995 4).

This irony of this juxtaposition was reinforced by the names of some of the alleys, such as Willow Tree Alley, Golden Street and Pleasant Court.

Borchert explains that the problem was exacerbated by the lack of extensive public transport in Washington, which meant that most people travelled around the city on foot. The increasing population thus had to be housed in the city centre, providing 'a substantial impetus for the continuing and expanding alley dwelling construction' (Borchert: 1982 23). The logistical problems associated with transport difficulties were compounded by the capitalist system under which builders operated. Thus, 'this potential for profit and the efforts to realise it, profoundly affected the nature and character of the alley communities that developed' (Borchert: 1982 23). Since the property developers were in many cases small businessmen, they were forced to pass on costs to their tenants, reflecting their being caught up in a capitalist system 'with which they had to co-operate fully in order to survive' (Borchert: 1982 39). It was this capitalism that the FSA photographers wished to reform and that Post was seeking to abolish.

Civil rights were also an issue in the nation's capital when Post was taking her photographs in the 1930s. African American academic and poet Sterling Brown observed that 'the Negro of Washington has no voice in government, is economically proscribed, and segregated nearly as rigidly as in the Southern cities he contemns [*sic*]' (Brown: 1969 89). Elaborating on this, Brown comments on the way

segregation in Washington seems an accepted fact. Public buildings and public conveyances are not segregated, although on every Southbound train Negro passengers are "jim-crowed". Negroes are not served in restaurants, saloons, hotels, movie-houses, and theaters, except those definitely set aside for them. Some stores will not accept their trade. Some governmental departments have separate accommodations, and some discriminate in the type of work offered to Negroes (Brown: 1969 88).

This is also reflected in Gordon Parks' experience. When he arrived in Washington to take up his post with the FSA in January 1942, he felt that 'even here in the nation's capital, the walls of bigotry and discrimination stood high and formidable' (Willis: 1996 178).

African Americans responded through cultural and political resistance. Weber describes cultural resistance, which presaged the civil rights

movements, as a 'war of manoeuvres', in which blacks 'resisted oppression in the margins of society by managing to survive despite severe repression and particularly by developing internal communities that countered that repression' (Weber: 2010 45-46). Post was exposed to these affirmations of cultural identity throughout her FSA career, Washington being her base between assignments. This reinforced the strong identification she felt with African Americans.

Black culture in 1920s Washington both reflected and influenced the New Negro Renaissance popularly known as the Harlem Renaissance and indeed 'for black Washingtonians the period served as a milestone of cultural achievement and consolidation' (Smithsonian Anacostia Museum: 2005 158). This cultural renaissance included the growth of black photography. African American photographers involved in this movement included Joseph Curtis, Addison Scurlock and the government photographer, Robert H. McNeill. Later, in 1942, Gordon Parks would move to Washington, when he was appointed as the first black photographer at the FSA. Other New Deal initiatives, such as the Federal Writers' Project were also a means for blacks to express their dissatisfaction with their lives. As editor of *Negro Affairs* 1936-1939, Sterling Brown changed the focus of interviews with former slaves so that they no longer produced nostalgic accounts of slavery but rather bleak tales of backbreaking work, familial separations, and white violence. Black education also flourished in this period. Howard University, for example, trained black lawyers who would become key litigants and leaders in the civil rights movement.

Following historians such as Adam Fairclough, I suggest that black activism in the 1920s and 1930s anticipated the later civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Post strongly identified with this action and her photographs represent her own contribution to it. Examples of black activism include the response in Washington to the 'Red Summer' of 1919, when white mobs attacked blacks across the United States. In Washington, black men organised into groups to patrol their neighbourhoods and

despite their horror and shock at being attacked in the very shadow of the Capitol, at the unexpectedly brutal nature of the attack, and at the reluctance of the police to protect them, black Washingtonians were

proud that they had fought back (Smithsonian Anacostia Museum: 2005 158).

This event, with its shocking spectacle of black Americans being subjected to violence in view of the Capitol, presages the KKK march on Pennsylvania Avenue in 1925, mentioned above.

Established black organisations such as the NAACP continued to lobby for change. The NAACP, for example, put pressure on Congress to pass anti-lynching legislation and criticised the War Department for racially segregating Gold Star mothers (of the Great War dead) who wished to travel to Europe to visit their sons' graves. The 1920s and 1930s also saw the establishment of several new activist groups in Washington. The Friends of Negro Freedom was created in 1920 by militant blacks disillusioned with the NAACP. It was led by socialists, including A. Philip Randolph. Other organisations included the National Council of Negro Women, established by Bethune and the New Negro Alliance, whose members included black political leaders such as Bethune and which carried out the 'Don't buy where you can't work' campaign.

In September 1933, in response to criticism about racial discrimination by relief agencies and in federal employment, Harold Ickes created a new advisory position on Negro Affairs. Unfortunately, Clark Foreman, the first such adviser, was white. Later, however, blacks were appointed as racial advisers. This led in 1936 to the formation of the Federal Council on Negro Affairs (the Black Cabinet), a group led by Bethune and Robert C. Weaver. The group met to plan strategies to improve the lives of African Americans. In 1936, Ralph Bunche established the National Negro Congress as an umbrella organisation for the many smaller black activist groups.

Socially-concerned white Americans also contributed to this black activism. As we have seen, Eleanor Roosevelt played an important role in civil rights in the 1930s. She resigned from the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) when it refused to allow Marian Anderson to sing in Constitution Hall in 1939. The Marion Anderson Citizens' Committee, formed by the NAACP to protest against Anderson's exclusion, lobbied unsuccessfully for the use of Central High School as an alternative. However, Anderson's performance in an open-air concert at the Lincoln Memorial in April 1939 proved a symbolic event, attended by some 75,000 people. The Lincoln

Memorial dedication ceremony in 1922 had proved similarly important when blacks invited to the event left in protest at segregated seating. This was repeated later when the Columbus Monument, which featured in Post's photograph of the white tourists throwing money to black boys (Figure 3, below), was used as the site of protest by Native Americans in 2002.

Black activism during the 1920s and 1930s led to some civil rights gains. For example, A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington planned for July 1941 was cancelled in June, when Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, banning discrimination by defence industries and establishing the Federal Employment Practices Commission to monitor discrimination and hear complaints.

Post identified with this black activism. So, too, did Eleanor Roosevelt, who warned Randolph of potential problems if his march went ahead. There were interesting parallels between these advocates for racial equality. As discussed in Chapter One, white female photographers were especially concerned with the representation of black subjects, perhaps because, as women, they felt a shared sense of marginalisation. Post and Eleanor Roosevelt may have experienced similar marginalisation related to their gender, but were relatively privileged in terms of social class and used this privilege to try to empower others. The First Lady's friendships with black leaders, such as Bethune, enabled her to act as a conduit between the President and African Americans he might not otherwise have met. In this way, while she could not influence the passage of the anti-lynching bill, she did initiate dialogue between the Roosevelt and the black community. As discussed below, she was also actively involved in the Democratic Party's drive to encourage the black vote. While Eleanor Roosevelt used her position as First Lady to attempt to influence policy, Post used her talents as a photographer to make a similar call for the empowerment of the black community. The actions of both women reflect their commitment to black activism.

Citizens' groups had also, albeit unsuccessfully, agitated for reforms related specifically to housing since the late 1890s. In 1904, the documentary

photographer Jacob Riis was invited by reformers to visit Washington and to report his findings to Congress. This led to the appointment of the President's Homes Commission. By 1914, the early reform movement was at its peak, with the First Lady, Ellen Wilson, actively seeking legislation to abolish alley dwellings. Legislation was passed which was due to take effect in July 1918, but was delayed by World War I and the housing shortage which followed and was postponed further by Congress after the war. Finally, in 1927, the legislation suffered an adverse court ruling. Thus, as Borchert describes it, 'despite more than twenty years of vigorous reform efforts, little change had been brought about' (Borchert: 1982 48).

The New Deal did bring some limited reforms. The Alley Dwelling Authority (ADA) was established by Congress in 1934, 'to provide for the discontinuance of the use as dwellings of the buildings situated in alleys in the District of Columbia'. Borchert describes the role of Eleanor Roosevelt as 'crucial in the establishment and maintenance of the ADA' (Borchert: 1982 52). The ADA aimed to eliminate the occupation of alley dwellings by 1944. However, World War II and the ensuing housing shortage meant that the ban was postponed until 1955. Thus, when Post arrived in Washington in July 1938 to take up her post with the FSA, housing conditions for African Americans remained poor.

When Franklin Roosevelt was re-elected in 1937, a majority of African Americans voted Democrat for the first time. This was due at least in part to Eleanor Roosevelt's reputation as a civil rights supporter and activist. She had established links with black leaders and felt strongly about black civil rights. She had a particular interest in housing. As Cook says, 'ER determined to end the mean and vile conditions just behind the great and comfortable houses' (Cook: 2000 157). The First Lady's sensitivity to the problems faced by the black community seems to have developed partly because of her contact with Charlotte Everett Hopkins, who showed the First Lady the alley housing in 1933. Cook comments that 'Washington's leading civic activist had at last found another enthusiastic champion' (Cook: 2000 157).

In October 1933, Eleanor Roosevelt joined the Advisory Committee to the Housing Division of the PWA. Beasley explains that she demonstrated an 'increasing personal sensitivity towards African Americans'; as First Lady,

she now 'supported activists – notably women of color – in pursuit of racial justice' (Beasley: 2001 138). Daniels describes how

in December 1936, after Franklin made his annual Christmas greeting to the nation and formally "lit" the national tree in Lafayette Park, Eleanor, in an activity not previously reported, made a similar gesture for African Americans in the nation's capital. (Daniels: 288).

Eleanor Roosevelt's willingness to visit African American space in the city was referred to only briefly in the *New York Times*, which reported that 'afterward, Mrs Roosevelt went to speak at another Christmas tree set up in an alley in Washington's Negro district' (*New York Times*: 25 December 1936 2).

In 1938 Eleanor Roosevelt was Honorary President and on the Board of Directors of the Washington Housing Association. In the organisation's Annual Report for 1938, significantly entitled *In the shadow of the Capitol*, Eleanor Roosevelt reveals an appreciation of the power of photographs to raise awareness of social issues. She says that

somebody sent me a thick package of photographs of housing conditions, all taken within ten blocks of the White House. I have used them very often. Everyone looks horrified and unbelieving ... I believe this is a hopeful sign because I think one reason that things go on being as bad as they sometimes are is that on the whole the great majority of people don't know that certain conditions exist. If they did I think they would try to do something about them (Washington Housing Association: 1938 4-5).

She goes on to observe that

our visitors praise our beautiful government buildings, and say that our capital compares with that of any other country in the world. I would be even happier if we could say ... there are no places that we would be ashamed to have you wander around and look into very intensively (Washington Housing Association: 1938 5).

Little had changed in 1945, when Eleanor commented in similar tone that Washingtonians could 'be proud of our buildings, since they make our city one of the most beautiful in the world, but we cannot be proud of many of the things which do not make it a good place to live' (Beasley: 2001 139). Not until the late 1950s would the alleys be demolished in an urban renewal programme. Beasley comments that 'ER was at the core of sweeping changes in race relations not only nationally and politically but at basic levels in the capital city' (Beasley: 2001 139). Cook observed that

ER's Washington campaign upset traditionalists even more than her commitment to [the New Deal planned community] Arthurdale. She introduced the untouchable issue of race and demanded that Negro residents receive respectful attention (Cook: 2000 157).

So, too, did Post, through her photographs, as I will argue in my discussion of the images below. For, like Eleanor Roosevelt, Post was a white, middle-class woman who nevertheless strongly identified with poor blacks. Like Post, Eleanor Roosevelt was not afraid to speak out on issues about which she felt strongly.

In autumn 1933, the First Lady held a meeting of black leaders at the White House to discuss the possibility of the Arthurdale Homestead in West Virginia being open to African Americans. MacGregor Burns and Dunn describe this as 'the first time that such a distinguished group of Negro [*sic*] leaders had been invited to the White House to discuss issues of burning importance to them' (MacGregor Burns and Dunn: 2001 392).

Eleanor Roosevelt had more power than Post. In June 1934, she gained the President's permission to write to Walter White of the NAACP, saying that Roosevelt would be pleased to see the anti-lynching bill pass. Daniels comments that 'it was more encouragement than he had previously given' (Daniels: 2015 337). The bill was dropped again in 1937, but Daniels believes that Roosevelt would have signed it at this point if it had been presented to him. The First Lady had met with at least partial success.

She could also influence economic policy. The WPA policy towards African Americans changed following her pressure. Badger explains that, 'Harry Hopkins shared [Aubrey] Williams's concern for blacks. Together, constantly badgered by Mrs Roosevelt, they increasingly made non-discriminatory provision for blacks as major goal of the WPA' (Badger: 1989 208).

There is little consensus on the First Lady's political views. Historians writing in the 1980s and 1990s emphasis her patrician background. Robert L. Zangrando describes Eleanor Roosevelt as 'an advocate of equal opportunities rather than a social critic or an architect of social change' (Zangrando: 1984 91). Indeed, Eleanor Roosevelt's own view was that 'sometimes it is better to fight hard with conciliatory methods' (quoted by MacGregor Burns and Dunn:

2001 397). Nevertheless, as Weiss observes, 'having someone in official circles in Washington whom they could trust was a unique experience for black Americans in the 20th century', even if many of her actions were symbolic (Weiss: 1983 135). MacGregor Burns and Dunn comment that 'civil disobedience was not a possibility for a first lady' (MacGregor Burns and Dunn: 2001 395). Both women were constrained by their relationships, with the architect of the New Deal and with one of its administrators respectively, yet both succeeded in expressing their views on the necessity for social change.

Furthermore, Eleanor Roosevelt recognised the power of photography and symbolism to effect such change. In 1936, she was photographed being escorted by two black cadets during a visit to Howard University; one million copies of this image were distributed by the Democratic National Committee. This was one of several occasions on which she was photographed with African Americans. At the inaugural meeting of the Southern Conference of Human Welfare (SCHW) in Birmingham, Alabama, in June 1938, Eleanor Roosevelt refused to sit in the segregated white section. Her actions meant that



Figure 3. Marion Post. *Tourists arriving at Washington, DC. Throwing pennies to colored boys in fountain across from Union Station. September 1938.*

she sat 'in a race-free zone of her own' (MacGregor Burns and Dunn: 2001 394). This was a symbolic, but nonetheless principled and courageous action. Like Post, Eleanor Roosevelt remained committed throughout her life to issues of racial justice; she 'continued to call politicians to account on black civil rights and women's issues until her death in 1962' (Badger: 1989 258). We can see this power in Figure 3, below, which was one of the first images Post created after she joined the FSA.

Post took this photograph in early September 1938, less than one month after she joined the FSA on 22 August and just before leaving Washington, DC on 14 September for her first assignment in West Virginia. This image has not been discussed in the literature. It is likely that Post took it on her own initiative, while spending time in the capital prior to her first trip. Even at this early stage, her interests, point of view and desire to express her activist beliefs through her photography are unambiguously stated. This is demonstrated in the contrast between this image and Vachon's photograph of the same location in Washington, DC (Figure 1, above).

This photograph was taken at the foot of the Columbus Monument, which stands in Union Station Plaza. We can see only part of what is a massive structure. This reflects Post's primary interest in the African American people in the foreground. However, I believe she was acutely aware, too, of the ironies of this juxtaposition of poor black citizens and the imposing memorial to the white explorer who 'discovered' the United States. The inscription on the back of the monument, not visible in the photograph, reads 'to the memory of Christopher Columbus whose high faith and indomitable courage gave to mankind a new world'. Columbus was, and remains, a controversial figure and this monument has been the site of protest by Native Americans, most recently in 2002. The action in this image takes place on the 'New World' side of the monument, represented by the statue of the Native American. Post was aware of the irony of the black boy standing next to this statue, on the left of the image. For both represent US citizens who have not been included in the 'new' world 'found' by Columbus whose discovery is represented by the ship's prow at the front of the structure.

Union Station is also only partially visible in this scene. Nevertheless, we gain an impression of the building designed to be 'monumental in character' when it was built in 1907 (United States Congress: 1903). The station is situated on the intersection of two avenues, half a mile from the Capitol, which it faces. Its massive scale is complemented by classical architecture and expensive materials, including marble, gold leaf and white granite. The six statues on the exterior of the building represent themes of the American Renaissance: Prometheus (fire); Thales (electricity); Themis (justice); Apollo (imagination); Ceres (agriculture) and Archimedes (mechanics). These symbols of progress, particularly the representation of justice, seem highly ironic when considered in relation to the lives of African Americans in the city.

Post's caption emphasises her primary concern with the people in this image. We are left in no doubt about her opinion of the tourists, who, in a scene suggestive of colonialism, or of white travellers in developing countries, are 'throwing pennies to colored boys'. At this early stage in her career, Post uses the term 'colored' to describe the African American boys. Later, for example in her image of the black man entering the movie theater in October 1939, discussed in chapter two, she employs the term 'Negro'. In the intervening year, she had clearly gained more knowledge about the terminology preferred by African Americans themselves. Post's caption notably describes the people in the image before providing contextual information concerning its location and date. The differences between Post's and Vachon's captions reflect the differences in their points of view and aims in their respective photographs. I believe that Post was shocked and angered by the scene she witnessed and that this image is one of the earliest examples of her work as an activist photographer.

Post's interest in using contrast and juxtaposition in her images developed during her career with the FSA. As discussed below, she took a series of photographs showing the contrast between the lives of migrant workers and the 'idle rich' in Florida in 1939. At the end of her time with the FSA, she also took a series of photographs showing alley dwellings in Washington, DC against a backdrop of imposing white government buildings. Post had returned to Washington at the end of what was to be her final assignment for the FSA, following her marriage to Lee Wolcott in June 1941. It is probable that this series of images, taken towards the conclusion of her time with the FSA, was also

taken by Post on her own initiative. Goldstein, for example, comments that 'such well-known FSA photographers as Edwin Rosskam, Gordon Parks and Carl Mydans were dispatched to make a formal record of alley conditions', but makes no mention of Post (Goldstein: 1995 18).

In the early 1980s, Post corresponded with historian James Borchert, who had recently published *Alley life in Washington* (1980) and was researching material for his forthcoming article, 'Analysis of historical photographs: a method and a case study'. Borchert had used several of Post's photographs in these publications. In a letter to Post in April 1981, Borchert commented that images of alley dwellings in the capital formed 'a tiny part' of FSA work. He told her that

your captions are incredibly complete and very valuable in their own right, leading me to believe that you had more interaction with the people you photographed (at least among the alley collection) than the other FSA photographers. (AG 114, box 1, file 17).

The captions Post wrote, in particular for Figure 4, below, confirm Borchert's assertion. Writing again to Post, in January 1982, Borchert explained that during his research, he had been 'unable to locate any 'script' for either Washington, DC or alley housing, or specifically slum housing in the Archives of American Art collection of Stryker's correspondence' (AG114, box 4, file 5). Again, this suggests that Post took these photographs on her own initiative. Borchert elaborated on this point in his article, published in *Studies in Visual Communication* in 1981. He explained that

while a substantial number of FSA photographers visited and visually recorded alley conditions in Washington, these photographs represent a tiny fraction of the agency's work; no visit represented a major effort, and there is no correspondence or shooting scripts associated with these assignments (AG 114, box 4, file 7).

Figures 4 and 5 below clearly demonstrate Post's concern with the conditions in which African Americans lived in the capital city. These images are two of several taken by Post in which alley housing forms the foreground against a background of the classical architecture of one of the white government buildings in Washington, DC. The shock produced in the reader by this juxtaposition recalls Barthes' idea of the 'punctum', or shock created by the inclusion of an unlikely element in the image. As we have seen, Post

sometimes added such elements deliberately, as in her image of the black man entering a segregated movie theatre discussed in chapter two. In that image, she appears to have planned very carefully, taking her photograph at the exact moment the sun created a shadow in a specific place in the image. Here, the punctum or shock is carefully framed within the scene. As in the image in chapter two, this is important, because it provides the reader with useful information, not just about the conditions in which African Americans were living, but about Post's point of view. As in chapter two, this is very significant, because it makes an unambiguous statement about Post's construction of and response to the scene. I argue that her response is one of anger and a desire for action to be taken.

This response is clearly represented in Figure 4. Russell Senate Office dominates the background of this image. It is juxtaposed with alley dwellings in the foreground. The Beaux-Arts architecture of this government building complements that of the Capitol and is an example of the modernism associated with the American Renaissance movement referred to above. As with the other buildings and monuments discussed in this section, expensive materials were used in its construction, including marble, limestone and granite. This building, like the Capitol, is a white structure which represents the white government. In this image, it literally as well as figuratively overlooks the black population. It is this contrast with the African Americans living in the poor housing in the foreground which interested Post. While buildings initially seem to dominate the photograph, Post has deliberately included two figures, Frank Coles and his friend, sitting with backs and heads bowed, towards the foreground. The viewer's eye is drawn from these vulnerable black human figures to the massive white structure in the background and then back again. I believe Post deliberately composed this image to compel the viewer to observe this disjunction and to acknowledge the shock which this 'punctum' produces. However, Post was not content simply for the viewer to observe. Rather, she wished the viewer to be shocked into taking action. As in Figure 5 (below), I argue that it was this desire for radical action which differentiated Post from most of her FSA colleagues, who were motivated by a reforming impulse.

Post's very detailed caption in Figure 4 contrasts with the brief titles provided by Vachon and Mydans. She includes information about what cannot be seen in the image, such as the interior of the building and its rental cost.

Post's emphasis, moreover, is on the people in her photograph. It is notable that she names her main subject, rather than simply describing him as a 'Negro' or 'colored' man. Further, she has clearly spent time in conversation with Frank Coles, who seems to have trusted her sufficiently to describe his employment, housing and medical difficulties. Unlike some of her FSA colleagues, then, Post clearly seeks to present her subject as an individual with whom she empathises. This caption thus fulfils the denotative requirement for factual information which contextualises it in time and place for the reader. More significantly, it also fulfils its connotative function, conveying Post's point of view clearly and unambiguously. The caption therefore strongly reinforces Post's aim in the image itself: to make an activist statement about a situation which has provoked her anger and her desire for social justice.



Figure 4. Marion Post. *Schools Court with Senate building in background. Four very small dark rooms rent for fifteen and eighteen dollars per month with water and privy in yard. It used to rent for six and eight dollars. Frank Coles and his friend are sitting on the bench. He was a cement plasterer but has been on relief during the past year. He has frequent heart attacks and his feet and ankles are all swollen. Doctor advises a chicken and lamb diet, no pork or beef, but he doesn't even have money to buy fuel. He can't get waited on in a clinic or get to one. He waited from before eleven until four p.m. but still could not see a doctor. He has been in Washington since 1906. September 1941.*

This anger is also evident in *Dingman Place, N.E. with Capitol dome in background* (Figure 5, below), where Post again juxtaposes a white government building and black alley housing. Like the Columbus Monument, Union Station and the Russell Senate Office, discussed above - and indeed the entire city centre - the Capitol dome was a product of the American Renaissance. This movement reflected the country's increased confidence and sense of national identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Modernism and new technology were important themes in this renaissance. So too was classicism in architecture. Neoclassical architecture symbolised order, dignity and harmony, which were associated with the 'City Beautiful', with its emphasis on creating civic beauty, not for its own sake, but to promote moral and civil virtue. It becomes, of course, highly ironic when an iconic building symbolising these ideals is juxtaposed with the alley dwellings in which most of the African American population was forced to live.

The Statue of Freedom, which forms the top of the dome, stands on top of a globe inscribed with the words '*E pluribus unum*'; 'One out of many'. This was the *de facto* motto of the United States until 1956. This 'melting pot' was not extended to African Americans, however; an irony clearly appreciated by Post. The statue is an allegorical female figure, which faces the sun - rising in the East, but not shining equally on all the nation's citizens.

There is a further irony, which becomes evident in the literature on the Capitol. Anna Siomopoulos describes the federal buildings in Washington as 'edifices that are supposed to be icons of American democracy' (Simiopoulos: 2016 214). The symbolism of the Capitol dome, and the Statue of Freedom in particular, have been discussed at length in the literature. It was originally planned that the statue should wear a cap. However, the then secretary of war, Jefferson Davis, later President of the Confederate States during the Civil War, insisted that this should be replaced by a helmet. The cap was believed to represent the pileus cap worn by newly-freed slaves in ancient Rome. As Vivien Green Fryd explains,

Davis clearly understood the practice of manumission in ancient Rome, when freed slaves covered their newly shorn heads with the pileus cap while magistrates touched them with a rod (the *vindicta*). But he failed to

acknowledge that the slaves on his plantation also desired the same type of freedom. He refused to allow any work of art in the Capitol that alluded to slavery either overtly or covertly via the cap, perhaps hoping that its visible absence would mask or erase the tensions that existed between the North and the South over this volatile issue (Fryd: 2004 148-49).

Far from unambiguously representing liberty, then, the statue contains a hidden meaning, one that relates directly to the issue of slavery.

The emphasis in this image is slightly different to that in Figure 4, where the Senate building dominates the background. Here, while the viewer's eye is drawn towards the Capitol dome, the focal point is the alley dwellings in the foreground. In the middle ground, a solitary tree is visible. It appears out of place here, another example of the 'punctum' described by Barthes. The effect is to reinforce the shock of the image. A lone tree will be seen again in the palm tree in *Entrance to Roney Plaza Hotel, Miami, Florida* (Figure 7, below), where, far from representing a 'punctum' in the image, it coincides with, and reinforces, the representation of luxury.

Nevertheless, here as elsewhere in her images depicting the juxtaposition of wealth and poverty in Washington, Post's main subject is people. In this photograph, we see two African American figures, a boy and a girl, who appear to be engaged in conversation. I believe the children are the main subjects of this image. They are overshadowed, both by their rundown housing which dominates the foreground, and by the Capitol dome in the background. This emphasis is likely to be a deliberate attempt by Post to convey the vulnerability of her subjects. Post has captured this image at a moment when the girl is leaning against what is probably the outdoor privy referred to in the caption. This rickety structure is unstable as well as rundown, which reinforces our sense of the children's own lack of security.



Figure 5. Marion Post. *Dingman Place, N.E. with Capitol dome in background. Negro tenements; four small rooms rent for fifteen dollars per month. Water and privy in yard. September 1941.*

As in Figure 4, Post's caption provides factual information, without adding further comment. I believe she felt no need to do so. She again includes details about what we cannot see, such as the number of rooms in each tenement and their rental cost. The shared water and privy located outside in the yard, referred to at the end of the caption, were typical of alley housing.

Post's work in the capital clearly demonstrates her awareness of the power of juxtaposition within images to convey her radical response to the conditions in which African Americans were living. This use of irony and disjunction was also evident in the series of photographs she took in

Florida. Here, however, Post shows us contrasts between images, rather than within them.

ENFORCED IDLENESS AND THE IDLE RICH: THE LABOURING AND LUXURY CLASSES IN FLORIDA

A photographic exhibition at the Museum of Art in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in September 1983, entitled *Dinosaurs and parrots – pictures from a promised land*, featured the work of Lennie Lyons-Bruno and Gordon Richard

Bruno. They explained that

West Palm Beach is a locale filled with contradictions. We have beautiful, multimillion-dollar mansions amidst the dwellings of another segment of the population eking out survival on Social Security checks. [Cuban] refugees wash ashore in the backyards of expensive beach-front condominiums (Bolge: 1983).

As George S. Bolge says in his introduction to this work, ‘this exhibition simply argues that in the affluent society of West Palm Beach, something is awry’ (Bolge: 1983).

More than 40 years earlier, Post had observed and been deeply angered by the same contradictions. Her work in Florida presaged that of the Brunos and confirmed her role as an activist photographer. As she was to do later in Washington, Post chose not to focus solely on the poor, but to draw attention to their plight by showing the contrasts between them and the wealthy in society. In particular, Post believed that the causes of the Depression, as well as its effects, should be brought into the open. Not least of these was the fact that the consumption of mass-produced goods had failed to match their availability. Industrial and agricultural production had grown throughout the 1920s, but low wages for many people meant lack of purchasing power. As Badger puts it, ‘structural poverty, irregular employment, and low wages meant that America was a consumer society without the capacity to consume’ (Badger: 1989 30).

Post sought not simply to document the contrasts she saw, but to use her images to bring about radical change in society.

The contrasts which Post perceived between black housing and white memorials and government buildings in Washington, DC had also been evident to her in Florida at the beginning of her career with the FSA. The wall text accompanying her work in the exhibition *On assignment: documentary photographs from the 1930s and 1940s by Marion Post Wolcott and Esther Bubley* in 1990 describes how

taken some fifteen years before the Civil Rights movement was launched in Alabama, her pictures demonstrate her acute sensitivity to the subtle undercurrents that characterized race relations in the South in the late 1930s and early 1940s (Wolf: 1990).

Indeed, Post observed in Florida a second set of contrasts, between poor whites and poor blacks. In Figure 6, below, a group of African American migrant labourers watch as one of their houses burns. We do not see the faces of any of the people in this image, perhaps because Post, with her characteristic sensitivity, was reluctant to intrude upon their distress. Nevertheless, Post is, as is usual in her photography, standing near her subjects. They appear stoical and dignified, forming a close, coherent, group, on either side of which is the disorder of the fire and their hurriedly gathered-together belongings. We follow their gaze towards the fire. They seem to have been left alone to simply look at what has happened to the little security they had. Post succeeded in capturing this scene at a particularly poignant moment where a slight figure, perhaps a woman, rests her hand on the shoulder of the tall man next to her, perhaps her husband. The group appears isolated and vulnerable in a harsh and arid landscape. There does not appear to be anyone trying to help them. The space left by the destroyed house represents all they have lost and is an ironic echo of the space in Figures 7 and 8 below, which represents luxury. Similarly, the group's motionlessness, here representing shock and helplessness, is ironically reflected in the inertia of the 'idle rich', surveying the world from the safety and comfort of a luxury hotel, or lounging on the beach, next to the safety and comfort of a large car.



Figure 6. Marion Post. *Negro agricultural laborers watching one of their houses burn to the ground. All they have left is piled on the ground. January 1939.*

Post took this photograph of 'Negro' migrant labourers just four months after she had captured the tourists offering money to 'colored' boys in Washington. The change in terminology is significant, reflecting as it does her developing political consciousness and her activist point of view. Post refers first to the people in her image, giving their occupation. This is a straightforward caption. The simple, emotional statement 'All they have left is piled on the ground' requires no further elaboration by the photographer. It also suggests that she has spoken to her subjects, at least briefly.

It was clear to Post that the situation of migrant labourers such as these was caused by external factors. Some fifty years after she took one of

several photographs of migrant families, Post explained that the homeless itinerant family had been 'part of a very large number who, through no fault of their own, had lost their farms to severe drought or had been displaced by machines' (AG 114, box 8, file Reference material). Efforts made by the FSA to provide housing for families such as these were not wholly successful. Writing to Stryker during a visit in July 1940, Post's own frustration with the FSA is explicit in her comments to him on the unsatisfactory construction of a migrant camp. She explained that the camp was

not a great success from the construction standpoint (as usual). They got rushed, had to spend the money immediately and instead of building shelters to meet Florida's peculiarities, they simply transplanted the California ideas. Consequently the people are prostrate from the heat, poor ventilation in those tin or metal shelters (cold in winter) and holes and cracks for mosquitoes and flies by the million (AG 114, box 8, file Post/Stryker letters II).

Many of these itinerant workers were frustrated in their attempts to find work. In a letter to Stryker in January 1939, Post describes how a severe frost had destroyed much of the vegetable harvest in the area. As a result, most of the packing houses were closed or working for a short period each day. Like black government photographer Robert H. McNeill in Virginia the previous year, Post observed the consequences of under-employment and irregular hours on those seeking work. Indeed, life around the packing houses provided highly effective material for an activist photographer. Post explained to Stryker that there were

many things to photograph around the packing houses, which give as good a picture of their lousy existence and general life and health, etc as around their homes and shacks. I don't remember that we have much of this. (AG 114, box 8 file Post/Stryker letters II).

Conditions were so bad in Belle Glade that several hundred people signed a telegram which was sent to Washington, DC, requesting a change in legislation following the destruction of their vegetable crops by low temperatures. Sugar cane had not been affected. If they were permitted to plant half their land with this crop, they would therefore 'be in much better financial shape today' (AG 114, box 8, file 'Wolcott/Stryker letters I'). In an interview with Paul Raedeke in 1986, Post explained both her motivation for taking these photographs and the use to which they were put. She described how she thought, "Wow, this is great. Why not use this material in exhibits and as contrast material" (AG 114, box 6, file 5).

Talking to Thomas Garver in 1968, Stryker claimed that he wanted to get more city pictures, but 'just couldn't get them. That was a little bit further than we could dare go' (AG 114, box 7, file Lecture Material I). It is interesting to compare this assertion with Post's own copy of a piece of correspondence with Stryker, held in her archive at the Center for Creative Photography. Post added handwritten annotations (in bold below) to the margin of one letter from Stryker, in which he observes that she seems to be a little ahead of the crops and that he is sure that she can find plenty of other things to work on while she is 'waiting for actual harvest to start. A little of some of the tourist towns, which will show up how the "lazy rich" **(as I first suggested!)** waste their time' (AG 114, box 8, file Letters II). I argue that this confirms that Post took this series of images on her own initiative, after Stryker proved reluctant to allow her to do so.

While Post's images of the wealthy in Florida were increasingly acknowledged by critics, her motivation for taking them was often misunderstood, particularly by early scholars. The essay accompanying the Santa Barbara Museum of Art exhibition, *FSA photography: 1935-1943*, is one example. The writer suggests that Post

probably shot more landscape pictures than the others, because by the time she came Stryker was interested in balancing the earlier photographs of the harsh realities of the Depression with others of the more positive aspects of American life. Wolcott captured memorable images of quiet and constant New England, of the western mountains and of Florida's rich (AG 114, box 3, file 1).

A short introduction to an exhibition of Post's work in Berkeley, California, in 1978 fails to consider Post's motivations at all. It states simply that, while 'she did not neglect to portray the sobering aspects of rural poverty, Wolcott was one of the few photographers to take pictures of the affluent in Florida' (AG 114, box 5, file 8). In a similar vein, the *New Orleans Times* described 'Miriam [*sic*] Post' as a 'girl photographer', who had been 'too pretty and young looking to be taken seriously as a news photographer' in her earlier position at the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* (AG 114, box 9, file 'Articles – Wolcott I'). This view reflected common sexist attitudes towards women in professional roles in the 1930s.

Other commentators, particularly those who knew Post personally, were more perceptive. These include photographer and close friend of Post, Jack Welpott. Discussing in a letter to Post her possible options for a forthcoming talk, Welpott suggests that she talk about 'the need to document the rich and powerful so that we can find out about the causes rather than the effects. There isn't enough of what I call Adversary photography around' (AG 114, box 3, file 15). Welpott develops this further in an essay accompanying an exhibition of Post's work at Syracuse University in October 1986. He explains that Post was 'the one shining exception to the FSA tendency to stick to the rural poor ... [she] revealed how the top third of America was finding its place in the sun while the bottom third was being parched into oblivion' (AG 114, box 6, file 1).

This recognition of Post's aims in Florida was shared, albeit belatedly, by critics from the late 1980s onwards. Abigail Foerstner, reviewing the exhibition *On assignment: documentary photographs from the 1930s and 1940s by Marion Post Wolcott and Esther Bubley*, held in 1990, explains that, although Post stayed in Miami, some 20 miles away from the migrant camps, 'she parlayed the distance into an opportunity to show the far greater economic distances between rich and poor during the Depression' (AG 114, box 9, file 'Articles – Wolcott I'). It is significant that the *Exhibition checklist* of Post's 29 photographs for this show includes seven from Florida, of which four documented the 'idle rich' (AG 114, box 1, file 4). This suggests an increasing awareness of the importance of these 'contrast' photographs to Post.

Post's aims in Florida were, like her motivation for taking her series of photographs in Washington, clearly to convey her desire for social justice. Her interest in photographing wealthy tourists and residents in Florida arose from her desire to make effective use of what she described as 'good contrast material'. In an interview with Teri Sforza, she commented perceptively that 'some people said the Depression was the great leveller, but the gap between the rich and the poor was still huge' (AG 114, box 8, file 'Reviews III').

This interest arose partly from her recognition that the conditions of the poor had already received considerable attention. In an interview with the *New Orleans Times*, for example, no doubt referencing James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, she commented

as for the sharecroppers, so much has been written and told of them lately, that I didn't find anything shockingly new or worse than has already been told about them, but conditions in some sections are pretty terrible (AG 114, box 9, file 'Articles -Wolcott I).

A new approach was clearly necessary if these conditions were to be highlighted in an effective way. Thus, she tried 'with photographs, to contrast those conditions with the affluent and complacent tourists in Florida and with the beauty, fertility and abundance of our agricultural land' (AG 114, box 6, file 8). This is seen in her photograph *Entrance to Roney Plaza Hotel, Miami, Florida* (Figure 7, below), for example.

This stylish, yet cool, image is taken from a greater distance than some of Post's photographs of African Americans, both in Washington, DC and elsewhere in Florida. I believe this reflects the distance that she wanted to demonstrate existed between herself and the 'idle rich' in their opulent surroundings and reveals her views on her subject, as can also be seen in Figure 8, below. A passer-by gazes, perhaps with envy, or perhaps with the same feelings as Post, at the wealthy guest standing in the hotel entrance as he walks by. There is no indication here that she may have spoken with the well-dressed man standing in the hotel entrance. Indeed, the emphasis in this image is on the building and its location. The classical architecture of the hotel echoes that of the statuary and government buildings in the photographs she took in Washington, DC and dominates both the hotel guest and the photograph. The shape of the hotel entrance is reflected in the shape of the enormous palm tree, only part of which is visible in the left of the image. Palm leaves form a frame for the photograph and here represent luxury. For the homeless people in Figure 6 and in many of Post's other images of migrant workers, trees and plants represented what was only the very uncertain possibility of work and thus survival. Post uses another simple caption here. She perhaps felt that no commentary was necessary.



Figure 7. Marion Post. *Entrance to Roney Plaza Hotel, Miami, Florida.*
1939.

In *Winter tourists picnicking on the running board of their car near a trailer park* (Figure 8, below), another image of the 'idle rich', Post's sense of humour is clearly evident. 'This image amuses me', Post said, in an interview with Hilary Dole Klein for the *Santa Barbara Magazine* in June 1989 (AG 114, box 9, file 'Articles – Wolcott I'). When asked by Joan Murray, in an interview in 1979, to name her favourite image from her early work, Post responded that it was 'impossible to pick one! Several FSA that I like: In Florida – the tourists on the beach in Sarasota, the winter visitor being served lunch in a private club' (AB 114, box 6, file 2).



Figure 8. Marion Post. *Winter tourists picnicking on the running board of their car near a trailer park*. Sarasota, Florida. 1941.

Robert S. Cauthorn, reviewing an exhibition of Post's work held at the Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, Arizona, in November 1985, described how 'with a keen eye for social irony, the photographer created images that are sly in their social content and robust with their humanity'. He commented on the way Figure 8 establishes the tone for Post's other images of the wealthy in the exhibition, saying that

when she shoots affluent people she does so from a great distance, often from above. This creates the feeling that the affluent (in many cases vacationing in Florida) are removed from the viewer, photographer and, in fact, from the times themselves' (AG 114, box 8, file 'Reviews I').

Brannan and Fleschhauer suggest that this 'lack of intimacy in her Miami photographs reflects the ability of the middle and upper classes to control social situations' and that the other images in the series were 'not polemical' (AG 114, box 2, file 14). However, I argue that the viewer's sense of physical distance from the subjects was created by Post, as in Figure 7, to suggest the moral vacuum between the affluent and the poor in Florida; between the idle rich and those forced to be idle. Rather than reflecting the power of her wealthy subjects, this is a deliberate strategy which makes clear Post's power and aims as an activist photographer. Sally Stein was convinced of the sincerity of Post's aims. In a letter to Post, written in April 1981, Stein describes talking about Post's work in a paper at a conference, where she read an excerpt from one of Post's letters which explained 'why you decided to spend some time photographing bourgeois scenes in language so political that no-one could mistake your serious intentions' (AG114, box 3, file 5).

A list of photographs sent by Post to Hank O'Neal, for use in his book *A vision shared: a classic portrait of America and its people, 1935-1943* (1976), includes several of her Florida images. Post has added a handwritten note to the caption of one image, showing a winter home in Palm Beach, reading '(in contrast to migrants' shelters only about 25 mins away or any other poverty stricken area)' (Post's emphasis) (AG 114, box 5, file 3). Similarly, Post comments on an image of the horse races at Hialeah Park in Miami, that this image shows '(middle and upper income recreation – sport)' (AG 114, box 5, file 3).

In an interview with Richard Doud, for the Archives of American Art oral history project, Post describes her experiences trying to take photographs of the wealthy at a racecourse in Miami. She explains that

they did take my camera. I got it back again but they took the film and told me to get out and stay out, and I think that was particularly because I was a woman, they were annoyed that I felt that I could get away with it because I was a woman, which was exactly what I was trying to do (AG 114, box 6, file 3).

I argue that it is clear that the young activist photographer was aiming for what Sally Eauclore describes as 'hard-hitting works [including] satires of wealthy tourists and penetrating looks at race and class inequities' (AG 114, box 9, file Articles – Wolcott III). The critical nature of Post's images was recognised by some commentators in the late 1970s. In a review of an exhibition of Post's work at the Witkin Gallery in 1979, John Ashbery described her photograph of a wealthy Florida resident being served lunch, as 'overtly satirical' (AG 114, box 4, file 2). As Ashbery notes, it is significant that in this image we look down upon the man being served. Ben Lifson, reviewing the same exhibition, expressed his disappointment that the images on show did not include more examples of her photographs of the wealthy in Florida; images which aroused 'a sense of uneasiness ... of shock at seeing so much wealth and idleness during such hard times' (AG 114, box 4, file 2). Lifson comments that the selection of Post's images in the exhibition 'mangled the work of a talented photographer' (AG 144, box 4, file 2). In a letter to Post in 1984, a friend commented that she 'had not known you were a thorn in the side of the system when you were a young woman' (AG 114, box 1, file 17).

This rebellious photographer clearly wished to challenge the system. She was also intensely irritated by those she saw as middle-class 'do-gooders'; her feelings also clearly revealed her attitude towards the church. Like her mother, Post disliked organised religion. Stryker asked her to work for a short period with a social worker attached to the Federal Council of Churches Home Missions Board, while she was in Belle Glade. Post's scathing comments about the time spent with Miss Lowry and her colleagues further confirm her position as a radical activist. As she told Stryker,

I suppose these women are at least aware of a few more things and interested and active, but God damn it I can't stand their approach to problems or their unrealistic and sentimental way of handling it. (AG 114, box 8, file 'Wolcott/Stryker letters I').

Post was relieved to be finally rid of Miss Lowry. She mentioned in a letter to Stryker that 'a little of that shining light was diminished slightly by the end of the day'. For his part, Stryker declared himself 'delighted' with Post's description of her 'encounter with God's chosen', revealing the humour which permeated

at least some of their working relationship (AG 114, box 8, file Post/Stryker letters I).

In Florida then, as she would do later in Washington, Post made highly effective use of the disjunctions she observed in society. In Florida, she created a series of images that highlighted both the contrasts between wealthy whites and poor blacks and the further contrast between poor whites and poor blacks. Importantly, Post's use of aesthetics, particularly her skilled composition, together with her detailed captions, enabled her not only to highlight the contrasts between rich and poor created by the Depression, but to suggest to the reader the causes of the Depression itself. Post leaves us in no doubt that the socio-economic problems she observed were caused in no small part by the wealthy whites living only 20 miles away from the struggling migrant labourers.

* * *

As we have seen, Post's radical response to the social and economic impact of the Depression, particularly as it affected African Americans, led to a radical mode of representation. I believe that this not only set her apart from her FSA colleagues, but that it revealed her as an activist photographer. She used juxtaposition within her images and contrast between them to make an unambiguous statement of her beliefs and to seek action from the reader.

In Washington, DC, Post took a series of images which I believe to be unique in FSA photography. As early as September 1938, soon after her appointment to the FSA and before she had started her first assignment, Post recognised that a scene of white tourists throwing money to black boys was suggestive of colonialism. This action by the tourists suggests the response of well-meaning, middle-class liberals to suffering experienced by individuals from a different social class, as described by Martha Rosler in her analysis of social documentary. The white tourists seek to alleviate a specific instance of suffering, but do not wish to abolish the system which caused it. It is unclear whether the white tourists feel sympathy or guilt; perhaps both. It is clear, however, that Post believes their actions will serve only to perpetuate the system. Her image of the two groups at the Columbus Monument outside

Union Station demonstrates an understanding of the power of juxtaposition to shock the viewer into acting to effect a radical restructuring of society which is entirely lacking in Vachon's photograph of the same location. Her powerful series of photographs taken at the end of her career, demonstrate both her continued concern with the situation of African Americans in the Depression and the development of her radical representation.

The two related series of images taken by Post in Florida reveal another highly individual response to the Depression. Post was quickly aware that her representation of the 'idle rich' in Florida could serve to highlight the problems of the migrant labourers there in a way that simply creating a series of images of poor workers would not. The shock produced in the reader by this contrast would, Post hoped, prompt the reader to reflect upon deep disparities and take the action she believed was necessary to bring about a radical restructuring of society. I believe that through her series of photographs taken in Washington, DC and in Florida, Post proved herself to be an activist photographer in a liberal organisation. She was unique within the FSA.

CONCLUSION

'A RENEGADE SPIRIT': AN ACTIVIST PHOTOGRAPHER IN THE NEW DEAL

Post was a rebel. She conscientiously fulfilled her FSA remit, but her emotional and intellectual allegiance lay with the radical Left. Reviewing the *Women in Photography* conference at Syracuse University in October 1986, at which Post was the keynote speaker, Dewey Schurman observed that Post's 'photographs and renegade spirit have made an impact on American social history and the maturation of style and purpose in documentary photography' (AG 114, box 9, reviews IV). A female photographer in a mainly male organisation, Post experienced additional pressures in her demanding job. Post's interest in issues not fully explored by the FSA also set her apart. While early scholars misunderstood her work, later analyses have not fully explained it. I have elaborated on and developed these recent interpretations and have demonstrated that Post was an activist photographer with a particular interest in issues of class and racial inequality.

My survey of the literature shows a consensus that black Americans were disproportionately affected by the Depression. Most critics agree that Roosevelt introduced limited economic gains for African Americans, resulting in their growing support for the Democratic Party. He failed, however, to address the underlying issue of black civil rights. While sympathetic to moves to address lynching, segregation and voting rights, he felt constrained by the need to maintain the support of Southern Congressmen. His inability to act on civil rights – whether real or perceived - meant that blacks suffered more than whites during the Depression. They remained a marginal group in 1930s society. Central government failed African Americans. I argue that they were also failed by the FSA, which did not fully explore the issue of racial equality. It was this dual failure which was of interest to Post. Her images were neither dispassionate documentary records nor a call for limited reform within existing social structures. They were the work of an activist with a radical political agenda.

Of the many theorists who have attempted to define meaning in documentary photography, those working from the same perspective as Post are most helpful. Some Marxist critics, including Sekula and Tagg, emphasise the employing organisation as key to defining the photographer's motivations. As we have seen, Post's views did not reflect those of the liberal FSA. Later scholars, who synthesised different strands of earlier work, provide a more appropriate theoretical model. These include Burgin, Rosler and Berger, who were influenced by Marxism, feminism and semiotics. Critical race theorists such as Raiford are also important. Berger is particularly relevant, because of his emphasis on the photographer's independent vision or 'way of seeing'. Post's independence and radical views make it appropriate to contextualise her work through her biography, not solely through the FSA. Given her independence of thought and commitment to action – exceeding the limits of the reformist FSA – Post earned a distinctive reputation and badge of honour. She became known, in the words of friend and fellow photographer Jack Welpott, as 'Moxy Marion' (AG 114, box 6, file 1).

'MOXY MARION DID IT ON HER OWN': A FEMALE PHOTOGRAPHER IN THE 1930s

Post's activism is revealed through her work on racial equality and social class. Her concern with race is evident in several series of images. As I argued in chapter two, Post's photograph of an African American man entering a segregated movie theatre can be interpreted as an iconic image, or an image that is easily recognised, widely reproduced, and representative of historical experience. Most important, in relation to Post, is the way such images can function as works of art which reflect democracy. While they may reproduce a system of power, they may also suggest idealism and resistance to authority. As Leicht observes, 'democratic art ... is not addressed to the educated elites, but to the so-called common man, to whom it might even provide recipes for social action' (Leicht: 2012 12). Leicht suggests that art can do more than just reflect democracy; it can also contribute to the debate. Beauty and justice have traditionally been linked through symmetry, making it possible to relate moral and political concepts such as justice to specific aesthetic structures. Where justice is absent, as it was in the segregated South, the symmetry of beauty

makes us aware of the value of justice and leads us to seek it. I argue that it is this function which is most clearly communicated in this image and throughout Post's work.

I analysed this image in the context of the FSA and Stryker, the man who directed Post's work. I established that the FSA was characterised by the liberal political views of Roosevelt and the New Deal. Most of Post's colleagues were white men. Stryker was politically liberal and was not unsympathetic to blacks. However, his cautious interpretation of his brief reveals that he was anxious to avoid controversy. He was motivated, rather, by the need to publicise the work of the FSA; to represent issues which could be resolved by the New Deal. Consequently, he discouraged his photographers from exploring underlying structural issues such as racial inequality. Segregation was addressed neither by the New Deal nor by the FSA.

As I argued in chapter two, Post was an anomaly in the FSA. She had more in common with Lyon, the radical white photographer who worked for Forman, radical black leader of SNCC, than she did with her liberal FSA colleagues. Lyon's image of segregated drinking fountains, taken more than twenty years after Post took her photograph, can also be interpreted as an iconic image. It contains similar elements to Post's photograph; careful composition, aesthetics, juxtaposition and symbolism. As in Post's image, all these elements contribute to conveying the photographer's radical activist message about removing social injustice, rather than simply bearing witness to it, or calling for liberal reform to alleviate it. Lyon's message, like Post's, was unambiguous.

Both photographers responded emotionally, as well as intellectually, to segregation. Both made a call for action to end this system. Post's image reveals the commonalities she shared with Lyon. I have argued that it also demonstrates that her activism presaged that of Lyon. It defined her as an activist photographer; a radical within the liberal FSA.

In chapter four, I argued that Post's images of poor blacks in Washington, DC set her apart from other FSA photographers. Again, this was partly because she explored the sensitive subject of racial equality, one with which her colleagues were mostly reluctant to fully engage. Post's use of aesthetics and composition were also unique within the FSA; I argued that her

radical response to the issue of racial inequality was expressed through a radical representation. As I have argued throughout this thesis, I believe that this representation was not simply a response to racial and social injustice; it was her call for action. I argue that Post sought through her use of specific aesthetic strategies, discussed in chapter one, to urge her readers to abolish injustice. Her strategy was two-fold. First, she sought to elicit the viewer's empathy with her subjects. Second, she made clear the discrepancies which existed between the reality of her subjects' lives and the democratic ideal to which she aspired for them. Post makes both an intellectual and an emotional appeal for action from the viewer. She demands nothing less than the rebuilding of society as a true democracy.

This is particularly true of the way she juxtaposed iconic white government buildings against poor black housing. Post deliberately included symbols of the American dream in these images. These symbols become highly ironic when they form the backdrop to the poor black housing which symbolises the status of African Americans in the nation's capital and indeed across the country.

Post's captions in her Washington, DC series are also important. As elsewhere in her work, these are detailed and informative. They serve not simply what Barthes describes as a denotative function, contextualising the image in time and place, but more importantly the connotative function. This helps the reader in two ways. It provides information about the photographer's point of view. Equally importantly for an activist photographer with a radical agenda, they urge the reader to interpret her images as calls for action; to restructure what she saw as a toxic society.

Post also called for radical action in the images she took in Florida. She once again employs contrast to good effect. In this series the contrast is between, rather than within, her images. Post was already aware of the 'good contrast material' in the lives of rich and poor white people in Florida. She then identified a further contrast, between poor whites and poor blacks, which also indicates the connection between race and social class. As with her images of Washington, DC, Post's captions help the reader in a way that those of her FSA colleagues do not. In her image of African American migrant labourers watching one of their houses burning down, she does not provide us with

contextual details, but informs us, more importantly, who these people are and that their lives have been devastated. She tells us, simply, that 'all they have left is piled on the ground'.

The issue of racial inequality was closely related to that of social class. Post's concern with class issues and in particular her interest in unionisation, was demonstrated in work she carried out before joining the FSA. The publicity photographs she took for *People of the Cumberland*, do not appear to have been discussed in the literature. As I have argued, they are therefore an overlooked source of information about Post's political beliefs. Their inclusion in this study has played an important role in my reinterpretation of Post's work. These images provide an insight into Post's response to the social and economic conditions she observed in Appalachia, a poor region in the 1930s. Once dependent upon agriculture, it now relied mainly on coal mining. Miners living in company towns were forced into an almost feudal relationship with their employers. The region was disproportionately affected by the Depression and New Deal initiatives to improve environmental and social conditions met with limited success.

Steiner's invitation to Post to become involved with the Frontier Films documentary about unionisation in this region was timely. Post was politically radical; had developed considerable skills as a photographer; had acquired some useful experience working with others; and had concluded that she wanted to use these skills and qualities in a meaningful way. She wanted to work for an activist organisation such as Frontier Films. It remains unclear how much freedom Post had when creating the images in this series, but it appears that she could use her initiative to at least some extent. She thus established the way in which she would work at the FSA, where she was conscientious in fulfilling her contractual obligations, while also pursuing the narratives with which she believed the New Deal and society should be engaged. The still photographs in this series are notable for their emphasis on family life, reflecting Post's understanding of the impact which irresponsible capitalism had had on the lives of the miners' families. Children are of special concern to Post here, as later in her work for the FSA. So, too, are African Americans. These images indicate an emotional response to the scenes she saw, as well as an intellectual one. We also see an example of her early experimentation in the

use of symbolism in her imagery, in her inclusion of the United States flag in her photograph of marching miners.

I argue that Post's experience in Appalachia had a significant impact on the images she would create for the FSA. It influenced her aesthetic style, as we have seen in her extensive use of symbolism in her images of black life in Washington, DC. More specifically, it influenced the series of strike images she took for the FSA, also discussed in chapter three. Post's concern with family life is evident in these images, together with her awareness of minority groups including, for example, Mexican immigrants, as well as African Americans. Some of her images address both issues. Post's identification with her subjects is well exemplified in Figure 9 in chapter three, where Post is clearly with the miners as they 'watch the scabs go by'.

Post's identification with her subjects was also evident in the series of photographs she took in Florida. Her feelings about people in two contrasting sectors of society living in such close proximity is evidenced both by the images themselves and by documentation in her papers. As well as her correspondence with Stryker, this documentation includes Post's note of a quotation by Thomas Paine. Paine, writing in 1795, explains that

it is not charity but a right, not bounty but justice, that I am pleading for. The present state of civilization is as odious as it is unjust. It is absolutely the opposite of what it should be ... the contrast of affluence and wretchedness continually meeting and offending the eye is like dead and living bodies chained together (Kulick: 2000 332)

Post clearly understood the continued relevance of Paine's words more than 140 years after he wrote them. Her society, too, was 'odious'. She, too, sought not 'bounty', but justice.

'A GREAT BELIEVER IN POLITICAL ACTION'³: DEMANDING SOCIAL JUSTICE

I suggest that my analysis of selected series exploring race and class provides a methodology for interpreting Post's wider work on these issues, including the marginal positions of other minorities. I have emphasised the use of Post's images as the main primary source for this study. As we have seen, Post's use of aesthetics is one of the main strategies she deploys to make her

call to action to the viewer. My analysis of photographic series and selected images within them has been contextualised by documentary sources providing information about Post's biography. I recognised that this would be especially significant when analysing a photographer whose vision was personal and highly independent. The photographer's 'way of seeing' is a primary concern of theorists such as Berger, whose writing provided an invaluable model for interpreting Post's work. Critical race theorists and scholars of intersectionality also proved invaluable when examining the work of a white, female photographer who was concerned with issues of race and social class. I believe this approach is applicable to Post's wider body of work, characterised as it is by her abiding interest in racial and social justice.

This understanding also enables us to interpret Post's work on other issues. In chapter four, I examined Post's images of African Americans and their housing in Washington, DC, arguing that they confirm her identity as an activist photographer. This series helps us understand her wider work on racial inequality. In September 1938, when she photographed white tourists throwing pennies to black boys in Washington, Post also took a series of over 100 images of Greenbelt, Maryland, a New Deal co-operative project just outside the capital. It provided a community for white federal employees. Images in this series show well-planned facilities, including housing, pre-school clinics, co-operative stores, schools, a swimming pool and a theatre, surrounded by trees and lakes. Post's work in Washington helps us understand that she would have responded angrily to the exclusion of African Americans from this project. There is no reference to this project in either the secondary literature or the primary sources. These images are a further example of important material which has thus far remained unexamined.

My analysis of Post's use of juxtaposition within, and contrast between, her images makes clear her use of aesthetics to convey her arguments. In Washington, DC and in Florida, Post aimed to shock the reader into action, by showing the disparity between poor black and rich white lives, and the further inequality between poor blacks and poor whites. This enables us to interpret other series. In a series of images in Summerville, South Carolina, poor black housing is contrasted with that of wealthy whites. In *One of the finer homes, Summerville, South Carolina* (December 1938), Post asks us to look at what

is perhaps the home of a plantation owner, offering a *Negro shack near Summerville, South Carolina* (December 1938) by way of contrast.

Nevertheless, Post was determined not to create caricatures, explaining that she wanted also to show the 'stoic courage and resiliency of blacks' (AG 114 box 7, Notes II). She was impressed by blacks' vibrant culture and the strength of their resistance. As discussed in chapter four, Weber suggests that the civil rights movement was presaged by cultural resistance; by blacks creating their own internal communities. Figure 15 in chapter two shows one such community. Post's work includes many such examples of micro resistance, including Figures 6 (a), (b) and (c) in chapter one. Figure 6 (a) makes an explicit statement of resistance in this small series of blacks using white space. In chapter two, we see a dignified man making his solitary way up the stairs to the segregated entrance to a movie theater - perhaps there to throw popcorn onto the white audience below, in an act of micro resistance.

Black resistance also took organised forms; the macro resistance of national, regional and local organisations. The NAACP was established in 1909, partly in response to lynching. The Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) was founded in 1914 by black nationalist Marcus Garvey. Post would have been especially familiar with organisations that were established in Washington, DC in the 1920s and 1930s. These included the Friends of Negro Freedom established in 1920 by A. Philip Randolph, the National Council of Negro Women, established in 1935 by Bethune and the New Negro Alliance (NNA) established in 1933 by middle-class blacks, who ran the 'Don't buy where you can't work' campaign.

In notes written in preparation for a lecture, Post indicates that she intends to quote black photographer Chester Higgins when discussing some of her images. Higgins asserts that 'the history of black people is not only of slaughter and abuse, it is also one more example of man's unending refusal to accept the debasement of himself' (AG114, box 7, Lecture Material IV). Post uses various means to show the complexity of African American life. Representing them enjoying their free time is one example. In November 1939, Post took five photographs depicting blacks dancing in juke joints in Tennessee and Mississippi. She explained that she 'wanted to show what black people did in their leisure time, and the kind of spirit they had in spite of all the oppression. They had been knocked down, but they were resilient and they knew how to

have fun' (AG 114: box 6, file 2). Elsewhere, images of African Americans fishing suggest the resourcefulness and self-reliance of the black community. Post's fishing images include several she took of mixed race African American and white children.

Post's concern for African Americans is evident throughout her work. She was also aware that other minorities lived on the margins of society, including indigenous people.⁴ Post took series of images of Native Americans in North Carolina, South Carolina and Montana. Pembroke Farms was an FSA programme which assisted Native American tenant farmers in North Carolina. *Home of Indians (mixed breed) who have not yet been resettled on Pembroke Farms. Maxton, North Carolina* (December 1938), shows the interior of a family home, similar to the poor black housing in Washington, DC. In a recent analysis of this image, historian and Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina member, Malinda Maynor Lowery, offers an interpretation more typical of early FSA scholars. She argues that

Wolcott's choice of perspective – middle distance – implies a focus on living conditions rather than on individuals. Indeed the family is an advertisement for the FSA's work, portrayed as if their existence was a function of their poverty (Maynor Lowery: 2010 150-51).

She concludes that, 'like so many FSA photographs, this one indicts the conditions created by poverty but does not ask for radical change to the system' (Maynor Lowery: 2010 151). I propose instead that what we have learned about Post's political viewpoint and aims in her images of African Americans

Post's final assignment for the FSA, in autumn 1941, took her to the Western states. Her instructions were to photograph agriculture and the file contains numerous examples of her farming images. As on many of her assignments, however, while Post conscientiously fulfilled her official remit, she searched also for those on the margins of society. More noteworthy than her many official images from this trip, then, are her photographs of the Crow Nation of Montana. I suggest that Post took this series of images on her own initiative and that she did so because she recognised the parallels between the lives of segregated African Americans and those of Native Americans living on reservations. I argue that analysis of Post's images of black Americans helps us interpret her motivation for taking these photographs of the Crow Nation..

Nevertheless, this series of photographs requires detailed analysis in a separate study. In particular, the issue of how Post's understanding and representation of African American culture informed her understanding and representation of Native Americans requires detailed analysis.

Post displayed great sensitivity to the issues of race and class early in her career with the FSA. Her first assignment, to the coal mining communities of West Virginia in September 1938, exposed her to the related issues of nationality and immigration. Minority immigrant groups here included Mexicans and Cajuns, together with Europeans such as Bohemians, Poles and Hungarians. Native Americans also lived in this state. Post did not always specify nationality. In an early image taken in West Virginia, she describes her subjects only as 'foreigners'. This lack of detail may reflect their unwillingness to talk with Post. Nevertheless, she has already developed the habit of providing helpful captions. More important than their nationality, is the information that these *Miners are often not much taller than children, especially the "foreigners" who often send boys to work at an earlier age than Americans do. Omar, West Virginia* (September 1938). This group of immigrants felt compelled, presumably for financial reasons, to send their young children out to work. This suggests that immigrants' wages were lower than those of Americans. It is also clear that Post believes the adults' short stature indicated growth stunted by early exposure to hard physical labour.

Post's awareness of the difficulties experienced by immigrants was also demonstrated in photographs of specific national groups. The series of images of Mexican miners that Post took in West Virginia is notable for its emphasis on family life. Of particular interest are four photographs of a father and his young daughter, sharing the simple title *Mexican miner and child. Bertha Hill, Scotts Run, West Virginia* (September 1938). In the first three shots, the anxious father holds his daughter protectively. In the final shot, both he and the girl smile and appear relaxed. We have seen that Post related well to both parents and young children. She does not provide details about this composition, but it seems probable that her ability to empathise with her subjects enabled the father to relax and feel comfortable about Post photographing him and his young child.

Immigrants also came to the United States from north of the border. The Cajun population, descended from French Canadians, was concentrated in Louisiana, where Post photographed them in June 1940. Post's interest in children is evident in her series of 12 photographs taken near the New Deal resettlement project, Terrebonne Farms. This series includes one of Post's colour images, *Cajun Children Fishing in a Bayou Near the School by Terrebonne Project. Schriever, Louisiana* (June 1940). This image is one of eight; the others, in black and white, show the same scene. I argue that here, as in her images of African Americans, Post shows her subjects as resourceful members of their community.

Post's interest in immigrants from further afield was reflected in her images of unemployed Bohemian coal miners, again taken during her first assignment. These men were probably refugees after the takeover of their country by Nazi Germany. As we know, Post had spent time in Austria in the early 1930s and been appalled by what she witnessed of the rise of Hitler. On her return to the United States, Post had become an active member of the League against War and Fascism. She and her sister helped their Austrian friend, Fleischmann, to emigrate to safety in New York. Post was deeply affected by this experience and would have been sensitive to the situation of these men.

She was sensitive, also, to the ways migrants from disparate origins cooperated with each other in their new homeland and had noted the acceptance of Mexican miners by colleagues from different nationalities. In *Mexican miner's wife and child are visited by another miner's wife (Hungarian) who is interested in starting a maternal health clinic there. Scotts Run, Bertha Hill, West Virginia* (September 1938) Post illustrates how Hungarians and Mexicans worked together to establish health clinics in the town. In *A more well-to-do miner starts his breakfast when he comes home in the morning after working on the night shift. He is Polish, his wife Hungarian. Westover, West Virginia* (September 1938), Post shows marriage between immigrants of different nationalities (although it is not clear whether the couple married before or after arriving in the United States).

Post's work on race also illuminates her treatment of other issues. Her left-wing politics are clear in her views on religion, for example. Three images of an itinerant preacher suggest the irreverent attitude towards religion which Post inherited from her mother. The dishevelled *Wandering preacher, often seen in the South. "Before I knew our Lord I used to be a terrible sinner. I'd get so drunk I couldn't stand up". Belle Glade, Florida (January 1939)*, is an eccentric figure, whose definition of 'terrible sin' would have been regarded with great amusement by Post. This portrait demonstrates her good-natured wit, rather than the exasperation provoked in her by Miss Lowry and her colleagues in the same town. Indeed, Post is willing to acknowledge the important role which preachers played in community life. *Preacher, relatives and friends of the deceased at a memorial meeting near Jackson, Breathitt County, Kentucky (August 1940)*, shows a group of bereaved people listening intently to the preacher. In another variation, *Itinerant preacher spreading "religion" to farmers outside warehouse while tobacco auction sales are going on. Durham, North Carolina. (November 1939)*, pathos is evident. The preacher may well be trying to 'spread religion', but his audience is clearly not interested and he seems a sad man, with whom Post empathised.

Post's stance on racial inequality, social class and religion suggests her likely views on subjects such as the environment. She took a series of 12 images of environmental damage caused by mining while on her first assignment. As we have seen, Post strongly condemned the conditions under which miners were compelled to work and made clear her support for union efforts to improve them. This knowledge guides the reader towards understanding her clear opposition to the impact of mining on the environment. As elsewhere in her work, Post's response is both forceful and unambiguous.

My study analysed selected examples of Post's work on racial inequality and social class. A radical activist photographer emerges when we apply the theoretical and methodological models suggested by later critics to her work. This activism is confirmed when we examine her other work on these and on different issues.

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I argued in my analysis of the secondary literature that revisionist scholars, while acknowledging that Post stood apart from her liberal colleagues in the FSA, failed to determine more precisely her beliefs and motivation. My examination of selected series of Post's images, contextualised by biographical evidence from the primary sources, suggested that she was a radical activist. Her images of two significant issues, racial inequality and social class, confirm her status as a remarkable young female photographer.

Analysis of selected series of Post's images suggested that new theoretical models might illuminate her wider body of work. Interpreting other examples of Post's work on the issues of racial equality and social class using these principles confirms their wider applicability. Post's response to the situation of African Americans is reflected in her photographs of other minority groups, both indigenous and immigrant. The latter encompasses migrants from south and north of the United States borders; Mexicans and Cajuns. Post also met refugees from fascism in Europe. In the coal mines of West Virginia alone, were Hungarians, Poles and Bohemians. Post noted the willingness of these apparently disparate groups to work together, both informally and within organised labour. The commonalities of social class proved stronger than national differences. This further suggests that Post's views on issues such as religion and the environment might be extrapolated from these findings. Examination of selected images confirms that Post's views on organised religion reflected those of her activist mother, as does her representation of environmental damage caused by mining.

Later work on Post was welcome, but was only a beginning. Evaluating her work using the theories of critics such as Berger and Raiford provides compelling evidence that Post was an activist photographer. Applying such theories to thus far under-researched examples of her work further substantiates this argument. Post's colour work for the FSA shows a photographer aware of the versatility of this new medium. It has the power to both shock the reader into an awareness of environmental damage and also to represent the expression by African Americans and other minorities of their rich cultures.

At the end of her life, Post remained convinced of the power of photography to both expose injustice and inspire action to remedy it. She was a renegade spirit.

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